Community College Response to the Student Success Task Force Recommendations

The college respectfully submits the following input to the Student Success Task Force.

The college supports some of the basic tenets of the Task Force Recommendations. And despite the widely expressed concern by other stakeholders that the recommendations represent an “unfunded mandate,” funding, while an important logistical consideration, is not the central issue in our response, primarily because we believe that creativity, local control, and institutional will can overcome some resource barriers. Specifically, the college supports the following recommendations, which reinforce both the scholarship of teaching and learning and the incentivizing of successful behaviors as keys to achievement:

1. The expansion of professional learning for part-time and full-time faculty, whether it is through Flex, state-wide efforts, or the continuation of local efforts.
2. The requirement of students to enroll in developmental courses and sequences early in their educational planning.
3. The BOG Fee Waiver linked to accountability toward student progress.

While the college supports these ideas, there is a measure of caution for the execution of other proposals that may be conceptually promising, but the details and logistics are troubling:

1. Centralized assessment is a sound idea; however, there are considerable questions about the ways that multiple measures would be locally controlled and the ability of individual colleges to influence those measures based on their unique populations. This local control of both multiple measures and curriculum gives colleges the flexibility to appropriately support the diversity of our populations. Further, centralized assessment would also seem to imply centralized curriculum in order for the placements to be portable to other colleges. Despite the similarities in curriculum identified in the CB-21
project, many Districts have vastly different philosophies of instruction and curriculum within developmental education sequences. The logistical implications of addressing these diverging instructional approaches are not only challenging but perhaps impossible. For instance, the trend toward accelerated curriculum and sequencing, which is supported by the State through 3CSN (California Community College Success Network), creates a tremendous challenge in standardizing the English sequence. We believe that the subtext of a centralized curriculum is problematic because the effectiveness of instructional delivery is more important than system-wide curricular commonality. A greater emphasis on professional learning would more powerfully address instructional issues than common coursework.

2. Encouraging students to declare a program of study as early as possible is also a sound educational idea; however, many community college students come to college specifically to explore their possible selves, and many make changes to original goals even if they could identify a program of study by the second semester of their college experience. The college is also alarmed by the possibility that a requirement to declare a major may force students to do so precipitously, which may result in a narrowing of the diversity of graduates that are needed for our communities to thrive. The college is concerned that students who need time to consider their goals will be punished by other recommendations that may compromise their financial support or registration priority. The recommendation is attempting to curtail endless wandering, but wandering and experimentation are not necessarily the same activity when defining academic trajectory. Requiring students to participate in goal-setting activities and pathway thinking, through both instruction and support services, can prevent the wandering without coercing students into a commitment. Instead of penalizing students for wandering, we could limit the number of “exploration” units a student could have. This would prevent the excessive wandering while still allow for appropriate exploration.

3. The “score card” idea can be a meaningful way to help identify whether or not colleges are achieving their goals by students meeting
The college is concerned that the metrics for the score card not be limited to static measures of success defined by the achievement of units or plans, but also by more nuanced psychometrics that, in the long run, probably have more to do with a student’s ability to succeed in life, not just in college. For example, metrics related to engagement, self-efficacy, goal orientation, and motivation would greatly enhance any measurement of a college’s influence on student success. These additional metrics would also help to make a “score card” more inclusive of the diversity of students we serve.

Finally, a few of the recommendations are alarming in both philosophy and practice. The college recommends that the Task Force carefully consider the implications and the long-term impact of these tenets on the mission and on students:

1. Several of the recommendations that connect educational planning, financial support, and developmental education seem contradictory. For instance, the recommendations suggest that a student who changes an identified education plan or deviates from it may be subject to the loss of the fee waiver. That seems a harshly punitive result for a behavior that a college education seems designed to support.

2. The emphasis on rigid educational planning alarms many educators at the college whose considerable professional experience indicates that many students do not require extensive planning efforts to meet short-term goals. For instance, one young woman started at community college in ESL classes, just so that she could learn to communicate with her children’s teachers and doctors. Ultimately, she transferred to Harvard University, even though she had a very short-term goal, devoid of a program of study. Community college educators fear that students who seek a business or communications class to promote or retrain are, at best, being ignored or, at worst, deliberately eliminated in the Task Force recommendations. These instances represent a powerful and tangible aspect of the community college contribution to the local economy, but there is little room to support these students’ needs in these recommendations.
3. Community college educators fear that the consolidation of categorical programs, which have already suffered considerable reduction, are even more greatly imperiled by consolidation and “flexibility.” There is concern that programs that serve the most fragile students will be pitted against each other to fight for resources, or that they will be scaled to equal measure; if this happens, none of them would have the resources to support students at a scale necessary to advance student achievement. Ironically, the rest of the recommendations are focused on centralized control at the State level, while this exception forces local districts, colleges, and administrators to battle over shrinking resources.

4. The recommendations supporting compromised funding structures for basic skills, through reductions in apportionment as non-credit, or flexible consolidation for categorical programs, will likely reduce services, offerings, and support for the students who cannot survive without them. Historically, the community college has helped to foster social and economic equality, and any disproportionate impact created by reduced funding will undermine the mission, the community we serve, and the principles for which the college stands.

5. Implementing many of the recommendations requires K-12, CSUs, and UCs to collaborate with community colleges. However, no accountability for collaboration, response, or changes within these other systems is established. As in the original Educational Master Plan, all three systems will need to transform to truly impact student success and completion on a large scale.

We appreciate the goals of the Student Success Task Force to promote student completion, and we agree that there is a compelling need for reforms. However, some of these reforms may disproportionately impact our most disadvantaged students, and they fail to address the practical realities of students’ lives and the multiple missions we are designed to serve. Batch processing and one-size-fits-all solutions ignore the complexity of the educational enterprise, and some of the ways suggested that we solve these problems may, in fact, magnify our problems, rather than resolve them. Rather, the solutions seem to lie in ways to share successes and scale many of the innovations that are beginning to show promise.