

Letter from the Sacramento City College Academic Senate

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Letter to the 1143 Student Success Task Force

The Academic Senate of Sacramento City College sincerely thanks the Student Success Task Force for this opportunity to respond to their Report. Particularly, we would like to affirm their recommendation that California not move to a performance based funding model. Struggling as we are to serve students in the aftermath of dramatic and continuing budget reductions, it seems clear to us, as it does to the majority of the Task Force, that diverting resources for performance based funding would be unwise.

We are somewhat concerned with the qualifier “at this time,” however. While we applaud those who wish to observe other community college systems as they attempt outcome based models, questions remain: for one, we feel student success is difficult to define. Any paradigm that tracks and reports success based solely on the number of certificates and AA/AS degrees that are conferred brackets the multitude of ways a college can determine the success of its students. Even in light of a functional definition, any funds diverted to colleges that have demonstrated “success” must come from resources that could be used to assist all community colleges. Most importantly, we are concerned that colleges with large populations of disadvantaged students, like our own, will be penalized under such a model. We remain committed to equity, diversity, and open access, and do not encourage any policy that may further marginalize our most vulnerable students. Additionally, faculty on our campus from many departments have expressed concern over the fact that many students need to repeat challenging courses as they move along their educational paths; to do so does not mean ultimate failure.

Finally, any discussion over student success must include the reality that there are significant economic and sociological factors that contribute to student retention that lie outside the control of community college faculty. It seems to us that performance based models understate these factors and attempt to place the bulk of the responsibility for students who fail or withdraw on our institutions, institutions that typically perform exemplary instructional work. Also, open access, while a foundational position we will never abandon, will always be a factor in our outcomes.

With all this said, we want the Task Force to know that we share concern over the number of students who fail our courses or withdraw. Experience tells us that some of these students will experience academic success at a later time, but the questions around student success are legitimate ones, and we affirm the desire of the Task Force to be innovative. Since community college student achievement is a statewide and even national issue, we offer the following recommendation: discussions over outcomes should be held among faculty and counselors who are actively working in the community college; much of this could be done at conferences we already attend and on local campuses. The results of these dialogues would be shared among faculty across the state, and proposals could then be piloted locally and outcomes shared. This process would take time. However, as persons who work directly with students, faculty perspective is crucial. Therefore, we trust that the Task Force will support continued input from faculty, counselors, and coordinators as these discussions proceed, including such symposia.

We do offer one reflection up front. While this idea may not be popular, many experienced faculty and counselors present a common response when asked how to better serve our students: there has never been and never will be a substitute for adequate funding to hire a sufficient number of counselors to work individually with our students, or the full time faculty required to maintain optimum instructional quality. Even when California had a budget surplus, our system was forced to rely on part time faculty more than was healthy. Adjunct faculty, while hardworking, are difficult to mentor, evaluate, and integrate into an academic community.

Quality education is expensive, and this reality must be faced by all citizens who are committed to the community college system, a system we believe to be the primary engine of social equity and economic growth in California for the last fifty years. We remain committed to the vision of the Master Plan of 1960 and the inclusive language of AB 1725 (1988), and our hope is that, during these difficult times, California will sustain these values.

A list of particular comments follows:

Recommendation 1: Any high school writing or math instructor who teaches five classes of thirty five students seems unlikely to produce widespread success, and the high schools need sufficient resources to perform their mission; consequently, institutional support that benefits the K-12 system will positively impact our community college. We already do some collaboration with local high schools, but we feel there is not enough. The percentage of students who have high school diplomas who test into English and Math courses below the freshman level, sometimes two or three levels below, we find troubling. While statewide content standards exist in the K-12 system, explicit communication between community college and high school faculty regarding our expectations in English and Math would be beneficial.

Recommendation 2.1: While the idea of a statewide assessment system provokes interest, we have concerns over the variety of writing and mathematics course sequences statewide as well as varied student populations; at the very least, colleges should be allowed to determine cut scores locally. We'd note that our English department requires a written essay as part of their assessment.

Recommendations 2.2 and 2.5: Considering that Matriculation budgets were severely cut in 2009-10, it appears the value of the activities and functions these units played in the overall guidance, success and retention of first time students is being revisited. We are grateful for this, and welcome enhanced resources directed to student advisement and counseling. We agree that there is genuine vision in providing a mandatory orientation to students and asking them to develop an educational plan as freshmen. That said, any such model should allow for investigation, revision, and exploration; changes in major and emphasis among undergraduates are common, and community college students should have the same freedom to redirect their education paths as students at the CSU and UC (or for that matter, many of their professors when freshman and sophomores). Hence, to impose a punitive consequence for not declaring a major by the second term may be neither realistic nor constructive. We fear this may serve to penalize disproportionately those students that come to us academically underprepared and economically disadvantaged.

Recommendation 2.3: Technology is useful as a communication tool, and we support its uses in instruction and with some student services, but it will never replace direct interaction with an advisor or counselor. Our Counseling faculty feel it is critical for the Task Force to be reminded of the delicate nature of the counseling interface, which many times has to address the basic needs of a student before faculty are able to provide academic guidance. This cannot be conducted or in any way replicated by a computer or program.

Recommendation 2.4: We support strategies and supports that would increase the retention and persistence of our students. However, such courses should be developed and offered through the student services and instructional areas. Programs have existed historically that have assisted students in just this way, and we encourage funding of prior, successful models. Also, we would note that the FTES for these new courses, if that is indeed what this Recommendation is suggesting, should not be drawn from existing offerings.

Recommendation 3.1: We encourage any incentive that cultivates student personal responsibility, and colleges already have academic, progress, and dismissal policies that do just this. Enrollment priority might also be useful in this way, but we feel local districts should determine which students receive this benefit. There are simply too many variables for the Chancellor's Office to make these determinations unilaterally.

Recommendation 3.2: We are concerned about the unit cap and about what would determine satisfactory progress, especially with our many under advantaged students. Every semester, with student after student, a primary cause that our faculty and counselors see driving student withdrawal and failure is personal economic difficulty; many of our students struggle because they are poor, and these students should not be penalized. We do not want to do anything to limit the options of our most vulnerable students. Additionally, what about students who are retraining for a new career or for advancement in their current career? These students should have full opportunity, a position we believe we share with the Task Force.

Recommendation 3.3: Most of our students must work full time or part time, and many do so at jobs which pay at or below a living wage; we would love to see more students enroll full-time, but the fact that part-time students have lower success rates may well be a result of economic challenges, not the fact that

they are not enrolled full time. We should be careful to make sure that our part time students have every opportunity to succeed that their full time counterparts do.

Recommendation 4.1: We respect the need to offer vocational courses which give our students the chance at gainful employment, and we believe we already do so. However, Sacramento City College has seen what happens when Legislative staffers, lobbyists, and the LAO are allowed to influence course scheduling: the evisceration of Kinesiology, Fine Arts, Theatre Arts, and the loss of transferable classes with clear academic merit in other departments because their course titles, written to draw student interest, sounded. Why should community college students have fewer options in their schedule than their counterparts in the CSU and UC? The local college should retain control of course offerings, and those course offerings, while always responsive to needs in the work force, should reflect full academic breadth as we prepare reflective citizens and not merely productive earners.

Recommendation 5.1: We support pedagogical innovation in basic skills instruction (or any instruction), and note that this is already taking place with basic skills on our campus. We remember, of course, that there is no substitute for adequate resources to provide the one on one help developmental learners need.

Recommendation 5.2: We are troubled by the clause, "state leaders need to determine...whether these programs would be best placed in the K-12 or community college system." There is no mention here of what faculty's role would be, or if the Task Force even envisions faculty involvement. Without faculty input, decisions might be made by Legislators or other leaders who are far removed from the campus environment. Some at our college fear that basic skills could eventually be phased out of our mission.

We find this recommendation troubling not only as it relates to our developmental students but also in terms of our English as Second Language learners. While we believe these two sets of students to be distinct and incorrectly referred to as a single group in the Report, we'd note that our college has invested years developing the resources, curriculum, and faculty expertise necessary to instruct basic skills and ESL students, and our ESL faculty believe their mission is distinct from adult education. Our ESL college classes focus on academic English, not life skills and basic English, which are the purview of the adult schools.

Recommendation 6.1: Professional development should always remain under local direction. For instance, one of the stated goals of the Community College system is to prepare students for transfer to a four-year institution, and it is important that faculty have access to professional development resources to maintain their knowledge of current developments in their field, particularly those that are applicable to the local colleges and departments to which their students will most likely transfer.

Recommendation 7.1: We are uncertain how stronger centralized control in the form of an enhanced State Chancellor's Office has direct bearing on student success. We certainly do not want additional monies to be directed to a central office during a time when we are turning away thousands of students just at SCC.

Recommendation 7.2 and 7.3: Here faculty feelings run deep. Some have asked, "Is there some report which shows we are not effective teachers, or that our performance has declined?" Most of us on the Academic Senate have taught at SCC for a decade or two, and all around us we see professionally driven, competent, compassionate colleagues. We are used to, and believe in the effectiveness of, a culture of peer assessment and accountability, where those who evaluate our work and programs are other faculty and administrators with extensive instructional and disciplinary expertise. Retention and grade data is already available to our administrations and our accreditation teams; will putting statistical information into the public forum actually improve student success, the purpose of the Task Force recommendations? We are skeptical that it will. Will such information be effectively understood by the general public, or will such reports lead to an increase in the undeserved anger we currently see directed towards educators and state employees?

In our view, the best way for the general public to improve community college student outcomes is to commit to enhanced social equity and a responsible tax structure that supports a commitment to public education, not to make uninformed assessments. We do not want to be mistaken: we genuinely understand the demand that we be evaluated and held accountable as instructors and institutions; our answer is that effective systems are already in place. Those systems can be improved or tailored if necessary, but this Recommendation speaks about something else entirely.

Recommendation 8.1: We concur with the committee's recommendation to not consolidate categorical programs at this time as this shift of funding would severely impact a categorical program's ability to serve some of the most vulnerable student communities. However, we do acknowledge the need for more coordinated and collaborative efforts between the programs to maximize resources and serve the highest number of students.

Recommendation 8.2: We question the idea that when additional funding is available that money must first go to the recommendations of the Student Success Task Force. Considering the sections we have cut during a time of increased student demand, the freeze or decline in faculty compensations, as well as the fact that the Student Success Task Force, twenty persons of whom only five are community college faculty, does not speak for faculty statewide nor even represent a consensus of faculty voice, making the recommendations of this report the first place funds should be directed we find problematic.

Recommendation 8.3: While this idea is interesting, especially on our campus as we integrate a model in English and Math similar to the example, are we to understand that the State will continue to pay apportionment to campuses with successful accelerated programs as though they did not have those programs? That is a remarkable suggestion. Time will tell the strengths and weaknesses of the new accelerated models. We believe these have value, but we are cautious in our optimism. This Recommendation might encourage colleges who lack the proper faculty buy in and training for these programs to succeed to attempt such models because they desperately need sufficient apportionment. We appreciate the grant from the State Chancellor's Office that encourages development in this area, but this Recommendation goes further.

We thank you again for this chance to respond. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

Collegially,

The Academic Senate of Sacramento City College

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