

# Higher education in California should better reflect the times

As the crisis persists, it's time for a new master plan that would streamline curriculum, bring funding in line with students' ability to pay and put UC, Cal State and community colleges in sync.

By William Tierney

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California's Master Plan for Higher Education is history. State officials and politicians don't want to admit it, but it's true. Blame it on a severe recession, a dysfunctional state government or tax-phobic voters, the result is the same. Contrary to the plan's vaunted goal, every high school graduate does not have the option of receiving an affordable, high-quality education.

This year's budget cuts were the deepest in the higher education system's history, and projections of continuing deficits promise even more. But California still needs a public option for education. The University of California, the Cal State system and community colleges are major creators of economic wealth, and their graduates are the future drivers of growth.

What to do? We need a new Master Plan for Higher Education that acknowledges a withering state role even as the demand for an educated workforce grows.

When the state adopted the original plan in 1960, higher education was commonly thought to occur on leafy campuses that trained individuals in distinctive curricula and academic specialties. Classes were offered at fixed times and places, and learning proceeded at the same pace for one and all.

The plan's four basic assumptions reflected this reality:

- \* High school education was separate from the higher education system, an end in itself.
- \* UC, Cal State and community colleges were largely funded by taxpayers.
- \* Accumulating credits and fulfilling credit requirements, regardless of their relevance, was equated with learning.
- \* Degree requirements and course content varied significantly across UC, Cal State and the community colleges.

These assumptions made some sense when the state's coffers were flush and the majority of Cal State and UC students fit the traditional mold: They were from comfortable middle-class backgrounds and could afford to be full-time students. The assumptions make less sense when government is strapped for funds and when many more students need to work and get state financial aid because tuition is so high.

Fiscally lean times require four different assumptions:

- \* High school and higher education must be linked to ensure that when students graduate from high school, they are prepared for college.

Tens of millions of dollars are spent each year bringing more than 50% of Cal State students up to speed in math and English, with often negligible results. That kind of waste could be significantly reduced if high schools and colleges agree on what entering freshmen should know and then work together to bring it about. That means, at a minimum, requiring four years of English and three years of math, including algebra.

High schoolers also should be tested to prove they can do college-level work -- not simply to meet high school requirements. If they can't, corrective steps should be taken in high school to overcome their deficiencies. This demands collaborative relationships between high schools and colleges that don't exist now.

\* Students, not institutions, are funded.

Some parents pay upward of \$20,000 a year to enroll their children in private high schools to help ensure them a spot at a UC campus, where the cost could be much less. That's crazy. We need what economists call the "high tuition/high aid" model: Students who need financial help receive it, and those who can afford tuition pay it. For this approach to work, the real cost of college needs to be transparent. Once the tuitions of public universities are adjusted to reflect the true costs of the education they deliver, we can better determine who should get financial assistance, and who shouldn't.

\* Classes are offered in a variety of settings and times, and at the students' pace.

Research has shown that students master material in different ways and at various tempos. Some need to sit in a classroom and listen to a lecture, while others learn better on their own or online. A variable approach to the time and place and pace of learning, including offering online rather than face-to-face classes, would not only achieve better learning outcomes but would make more classes available to more students, so students would not be stuck in college waiting to take the courses they need.

\* Course content, and what students are expected to know to acquire a specific degree, is standardized or closely related across the system. Meeting those expectations, rather than acquiring credits, would be the key to getting a degree.

Now, what a student learns in English 101, Biology 1 or introductory psychology varies wildly, and there are no objective criteria to determine what students should take away from their learning. On top of that, students navigate a crazy quilt of different required classes, school by school. Students from community colleges who wish to transfer to a UC or Cal State often find that the courses they have taken don't apply to a bachelor's degree, and they end up not transferring or staying too long at the four-year school.

With new assumptions, the Master Plan would retain its mission: All California citizens who meet basic requirements would be able to obtain a postsecondary degree. The state would receive income from students who could afford to pay the market cost for a degree. UC campuses, the Cal State schools and community colleges would operate in sync, making it easier for students to move within the whole system and reducing costs. A streamlined, uniform curriculum would mean fewer course offerings and less time to get a degree. Students better prepared for college would lessen the state's obligation to foot the bill for unprepared ones. Learning would be 24/7.

California's higher education system was widely considered the crown jewel of public higher education. It has fallen upon hard times largely because of forces beyond its control. Making the Master Plan's assumptions square with today's fiscal and learning realities is the first step in

returning the system to its former glory.