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**Community Voices:**

**College students must focus on finishing on time**

Borrowing the opening line of a popular country-music song: Mamas (and daddies), if you want your babies to grow up to be college students, you'd better start working on it now.

With the Legislature and governor still battling over a multi-billion-dollar budget hole, higher education is only going to get more costly, student aid less likely and the availability of college classes stretched thin.

Valley colleges and universities, including Bakersfield College, Taft College, Cal State Bakersfield and National University, have banded together in the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium to assure students from all economic and social backgrounds that they can obtain college degrees. The challenge to achieve that goal has been made harder by California's dire economic problems and the willingness of some politicians to balance the state budget on the backs of our students.

But working with area high schools, as well as the communities and industries that rely on an educated workforce and citizenry, valley colleges will innovatively address student needs and stretch their limited resources.

Students' families -- their mothers, fathers and extended families -- also have critical roles to play to assure that students are not deprived of their futures.

Simply, they must prepare their students for college. Students must be prepared to complete a two-year community college course in two years; and a four-year college and university course in four years.

Dragging out these courses -- often by taking required remedial courses to make up for deficient high school work -- adds to the already escalating cost of higher education, and it results in students becoming discouraged and quitting before obtaining a degree.

In its "Closing the Gap" report, the Public Policy Institute of California recently concluded California will have 1 million fewer college graduates than it needs in 2025. Only 35 percent of working-age adults will have a college degree in an economy that would otherwise require 41 percent of workers to have a college degree.

Researchers at PPIC point out that expected school funding cuts are coming at a bad time. To keep growing, California's economy needs more college graduates; it needs more money, not less, invested in education.

The PPIC report focused on three critical needs: increasing college attendance rates; increasing transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions; and increasing graduation rates among four-year institutions.

At the heart of these critical needs is student preparedness.

Using a variety of measurements, researchers estimate that between 20 percent and 30 percent of an entering community college class transfers to a four-year college. Educators at all levels are working to improve this rate, as well as graduation rates at four-year colleges, by coordinating course requirements and preparing students for college-level work.

Parents must encourage their students to stay focused on learning the skills needed to go to college and succeed. They must insist their children receive the education and counseling to support this focus. Remedial courses are steps backward that add to the cost of obtaining a higher education. They add to the obstacles that already block many promising students from following their dreams.

For more information, click on to [www.CollegeNext.org](http://www.CollegeNext.org).

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