

Community Colleges Serve Important Role

Re: National Community College Month

Dear Editor,

Planning for college is something that many American families do starting from the time their children are born. Recognizing that college graduates on average earn \$1 million more over a 40-year career than high school graduates, families invest to provide that education. Higher education can provide a greater quality to one's life.

California families have a head start on that investment – community colleges. More than 50 years ago state leaders framed a Master Plan for Higher Education that is the model for community colleges, California State University and the University of California system, and the blueprint for the world attempting to provide greater access to higher education.

Access to the first two years of a college education, as outlined in the plan, would be low cost and open to all in a series of community colleges around the state. Today, 109 institutions serve communities from the Redwoods to Imperial County. Almost 3 million students of all ages attend those colleges. Millions more are graduates or transferred to complete a bachelor's degree at a 4-year school. In fact, half of all UC students and three out of five CSU students start their college careers at community colleges. The plan has indeed succeeded.

The cost of attending those colleges is the lowest in the nation. Students have an opportunity to live at home and for less than \$300 a semester attend classes that transfer to a college or university. Financial aid and scholarships are available that cut costs even more.

For those who don't aspire to a college degree, community colleges are fertile fields of vocational training. Students can quickly earn credentials that prepare them for well-paying jobs in fields as varied as heavy equipment operations and health careers. Community colleges are the largest provider of nurse training in America. They give California residents an opportunity to prepare themselves for a better job and a better life.

President Bush has recognized the effectiveness of America's community colleges and is scheduled to address the American Association of Community Colleges later this month as part of National Community College Month activities. It is hoped that he will announce the disbursement of more than \$200 million in job-training funds. If so, these funds will allow community colleges to expand training opportunities throughout the nation.

Locally, this is especially important. Kings and Fresno counties have low educational attainment rates and jobs go begging because of a lack of trained workers. Health care

workers are in high demand. Coalinga State Hospital will hire up to 800 psychiatric technicians when it opens.

A new hotel just breaking ground at The Palace in Lemoore will need hundreds of trained hospitality workers. Trained truck drivers are also needed, as are construction workers and people trained in agile manufacturing. Skilled workers are in high demand and community colleges can provide those skills.

But training programs are in short supply and California's budget situation has had a serious impact on the ability of its community colleges to offer this training. Federal dollars will be welcome – and put to good use.

If you ask around, almost every family (and every employer) in California has benefited from a community college education. I am a product of West Hills College. So is my wife and so are our two daughters. So is California's governor.

If you look underneath the big university sweatshirt that so many people proudly wear, you're liable to find traces of a community college education – some might say the tee-shirt of their wardrobe. While people aren't so quick to show off their tee-shirt (or claim their community college background), they provide a solid and necessary foundation.

April is as good a time as any to reflect on the history of community colleges and to envision the bright future ahead if our colleges receive the support necessary to allow them to continue to offer educational opportunities for all Californians.

April is also the time for students to think about getting started on the road to that brighter future. Enrollment is now underway for summer and fall classes at West Hills. Visit us at www.westhillscollge.com for details.

Sincerely,

Frank Gornick
Chancellor