

**By Dr. Frank Gornick, Chancellor
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Vocational training programs have been at the forefront of news in recent months as the nation struggles to balance serious budget deficits at both the state and federal level. Community colleges are at the vortex of this discussion.

California's system of 109 community colleges has been charged with the mission of vocational education since the formation of California's Master Plan for Higher Education in the 1950s. Unfortunately, funding issues that go with this master plan have not been adequately addressed. The state pays its community colleges the same rate for students attending expensive vocational programs that it pays for students taking college general education classes that serve greater numbers of students with far fewer faculty, facilities and instructional supplies.

A very specific example of this problem presents itself at West Hills College Coalinga - a small community college serving the western edge of Central California's San Joaquin Valley. The region has been acknowledged as the poorest in America today - poorer than even the Appalachian Mountain region that has long been the test for poverty. Educational attainment levels are low and well paying jobs are scarce.

But West Hills has set out to help change that. In fact, it was recognized in 2002 by the MetLife Foundation as the small community college nationwide that best helps move people into livable wage jobs.

When talk of locating a state mental hospital in the region began, West Hills stepped to the plate and proposed a training program for psychiatric technicians. In part because of the willingness of West Hills to establish this program, the state is now building a hospital that will provide more than 2,000 jobs in the community. Scheduled to open within the next year, it will employ more than 800 psychiatric technicians at starting salaries of \$42,000 a year. Average per capita income in the region is less than \$14,000.

Entry into the West Hills training program is open to all persons 18 years of age and older with a high school diploma or equivalency, a clean background and basic college math and English ability. The three semester program (which is run over the course of one calendar year) covers basic nursing, pharmacology, psychology and interventions for mental and developmental disabilities. Students who pass a state licensing exam are readily employable since there are more than 2,000 job openings around the state for psychiatric technicians.

But here's the rub. The cost of training psychiatric technicians at West Hills is more than twice what the state provides to West Hills for educating students. The program was started with a \$6 million start-up grant from the Nurse Workforce Initiative. Money was invested in facilities, hiring staff (at levels of 15 students to 1 instructor as required by state nursing boards) and buying specialized equipment. It was also spent to help

educate the public about the jobs that would be available in the future and the training that would be required for those jobs.

The grant was for three years and that money has been well spent. In the beginning, fewer than 30 students would apply for each class of 45. Today, a lottery is held to pick students and waiting lists are in place. Today, the program has 119 graduates (plus 98 currently in the program) and West Hills-trained psych techs are working throughout the state - many waiting to return to their homes in the San Joaquin Valley when Coalinga State Hospital opens.

But like all California community colleges, West Hills is challenged with making ends meet. State funds cover only about half the cost of running the psychiatric technician program and with grant funds depleted, West Hills is talking of reducing the cohorts to only one class a year of 30 students. If you run the numbers, this means that more than 100 potential students per year will not receive training that could earn each of them \$42,000 a year for a total lost earnings potential in the community of over \$4 million a year. Using a conservative economic multiplier of 1.5, you discover that our communities stand to lose \$6 million a year if this program is cut.

There is no doubt that vocational training programs are a good investment for the state and federal government. They are a good investment for the communities they serve. The question that is unanswered though is how we will pay for them.