



INSTITUTE
FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION
LEADERSHIP
& POLICY

Political and Policy Barriers to Basic Skills Education in the California Community Colleges

Jeremy Offenstein

Nancy Shulock

Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy

Presented at:

The Annual Meeting of the American Educational
Research Association

San Diego, CA

April 14th, 2009

California State University, Sacramento

California Is Becoming Less Educated Than Other States

(Rank Among States in % with College Degrees)

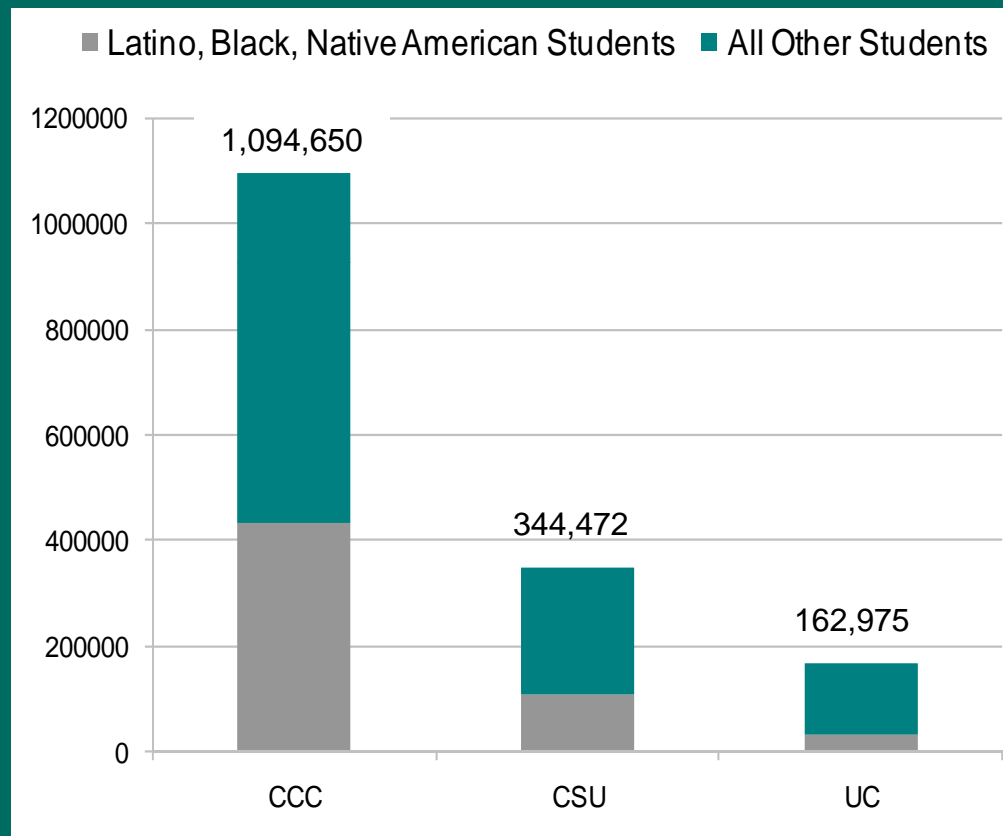
Age Group:	AA or Higher	BA or Higher
>64	3 rd	4 th
45-64	14 th	13 th
35-44	26 th	17 th
25-34	31 st	26 th

Racial/Ethnic Gaps in Enrollment and Completion

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of 18-24 Year Olds Enrolled in College
White	45%
Black	35%
Hispanic or Latino	27%

Certificates and degrees awarded compared to enrollment is at least one-third higher for white students than for blacks and Latinos

Community Colleges are Key to Solving the Problem: Most Undergraduates Enroll in the Community Colleges



Basic Skills Education in the Community Colleges

- Large preparation problem in California
 - 45th in number of students taking advanced math and science courses in high school
 - in the bottom quartile of states for 8th grade performance for all subjects on NAEP
- Many CCC students are underprepared
 - Nearly 720,000 students took basic skills courses
 - 70-80% of first-time students need basic skills education
- Many students don't successfully complete basic skills courses
 - Course completion rate of 60.5%

The Basic Skills Initiative

- Important faculty driven effort to improve basic skills education
- Uses information dissemination as primary mechanism for change
- Change is addressed in individual institutions/classrooms
- Focus primarily on institutional activities; less focus on data-driven institutional changes
- Doesn't address state and system policy change

Policy Matters

- State and system policies create conditions under which colleges and students operate
- Are those conditions as favorable as they could be?
- Basic Skills Initiative faces limits on success
 - Academic and student support policies
 - Finance policies

Academic Policies Limit Basic Skills Success

- State and system policies:
 - Lead to unclear messages about college readiness
 - In effect, 110 definitions
 - Give colleges discretion over who to exempt from assessment
 - Stipulate that placement by assessment is advisory only
 - Mandate a burdensome pre/corequisite validation process
 - Prevents requiring that students take basic skills and take them early

Finance Policies Limit Basic Skills Success

- State funding formula: K-14 zero sum game
 - Disincentive for CCC to support costly K-12 reforms
- Enrollment-based funding
 - Discourages mandates on students, e.g., assessment and placement, prerequisites
 - Discourages strong messages to prospective students
- Spending restrictions
 - 50% law constrains spending on student support services; bigger impact on less affluent districts
 - 75/25 ratio for full time/part-time faculty could constrain basic skills faculty hiring

Political Context: An Additional Challenge

- Public Skepticism Toward Basic Skills Mission
 - Concerns over paying twice
 - Doubts about “college material”
 - Fear of diversion from transfer and CTE missions
 - Concerns over “tracking” students into basic skills
- Internal CCC Political Context
 - Complicated governance structure
 - Fears of becoming “basic skills colleges”
 - Resistance to resource reallocation – winners/losers
 - Local autonomy takes priority over statewide missions

Conclusion: Raising the Ceiling of Success

- Engage external stakeholders in policy change agenda
- Place policy reform in statewide context: public agenda
 - Needs of the state: participation, completion, degrees
 - K-16 cooperation around basic skills imperative
- Policy change priorities
 - Clear messages on college readiness
 - Mandatory assessment/placement
 - Enough funding to accommodate basic skills classes
 - Spending flexibility to support local needs
 - Better incentives in funding models
 - Better data

Example of Theory of Change that Addresses Policy: Bridges To Opportunity

