

Testimony to California Performance Review (CPR) Commission
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First let me clarify that although I work at a CSU campus, my views do not represent the CSU system. They reflect my judgment, as one who studies higher education policy, of what California needs.

This occasion is timely for me: we have just completed a study of what California can learn from other high growth states about how to define and implement a state agenda to improve higher education. We have concluded that California badly needs the kind of Executive branch attention that CPR reflects. It is embarrassing that other states have strategic plans, agendas, data systems, and accountability structures and we have pending bills. California, frankly, is in trouble. We have fine institutions but huge unmet needs and no plans to meet them.

I will address the five recommendations that I view as most important to addressing the urgent problems we face.

1. Consolidate Selected State Higher Education Agencies (ETV 03)

CPR identified some key problems but has the wrong solutions. These four agencies should not be consolidated simply because they all have something to do with higher education. We need a strong coordinating board – one with authority and resources to develop plans to meet the state's needs. Not just its own staff resources but resources to influence the segments to respond to a state agenda. CPEC does need to be more accountable to the Governor because executive branch support is vital to implementing a state plan, once developed. But CPEC should not be in the Secretary's office where it can become too politicized. Accountability to the Governor can be accomplished through the appointment of commissioners.

Combining the Student Aid Commission and CPEC is a good idea because integrating student aid policies into a state's overall program and finance planning is critical.

The Community Colleges should remain outside the secretary's office. The current structure is ineffective because the Board of Governors has minimal authority to influence resource allocation to districts. This problem should be addressed directly. The board needs more authority. Also, the community colleges serve over 70% of public college enrollment in this state and must be an equal partner to UC and CSU in collective planning for education beyond high school.

The bottom line is that we have ineffective boards not because they are separate and not because they don't report to the Governor. They are ineffective because we refuse to give them the authority and resources to be effective.

2. Improve Higher Education Accountability to Meet the State's Needs (ETV 21)

I strongly support this recommendation. SB 1331 reflects a model effort in which all segments, including the independents, worked together to develop principles by which the segments would be accountable to meet the state's needs, consistent with their unique missions. We should proceed to implement it.

3. Establish Community College Enrollment Priorities (ETV 19)

Right problem but wrong solution. We absolutely must set better priorities within the community colleges. There are too many "perpetual students." The culture of the system must become more oriented to completion and accountable for producing degrees and certificates. But the recommended priorities are too simplistic. It is wrong to give students with BAs the lowest priority. The community colleges must meet state workforce needs and there are scores of BA holders who need retraining and who employers need to be retrained. The state should set priorities but in setting them should look at more than just the number of accrued units. We need to look at assessment and placement policies (or lack thereof), at fee policies, and late registration, and other things we know impede progress and completion. And we need to finally define what it means to enroll anyone "who can benefit."

4. Make it Easier for Students to Transfer (ETV 15)

I agree completely. Transfer policies in California are worse than almost every state. Everyone knows it. But despite all the alphabet soup programs to address it, our policies remain a disservice to students and an inefficient use of state resources. We need to get beyond the defensive academic arguments and adopt a core transfer curriculum. Many other states have done it and hell has not frozen over.

5. Expand Options for Obtaining a Bachelors Degree (ETV 23)

This is a bad idea. The community colleges have more missions than they can manage already. And California has enough real problems that we should not try to fix something that is not broken. Let other states waste time and money fighting battles over mission. We have 32 public and numerous private colleges and universities that can offer upper division programs on community college campuses to increase access in rural areas.