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Some Lessons from Florida for California's Higher Education Policy

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California Can Learn from Other States to Improve Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Several recent reports demonstrate that California needs to increase educational attainment levels to maintain economic competitiveness with other states and countries. In order to achieve this goal, it is especially important that California find ways to increase college success and degree completion in the state's community college system where nearly three-quarters of undergraduates are enrolled. The higher education policies and practices in other states, particularly those with large and diverse populations, may offer lessons for California in its efforts to increase degree production. Florida is viewed as a reform-oriented state in the area of education policy, and has participated in a number of recent national projects focused on improving student outcomes. It is the fourth-largest state in the country and, like California, has a large public higher education system that relies heavily on its community colleges (see sidebar).

Some Policies in Florida Hold Promise for California

Several of Florida's policy approaches for public higher education warrant consideration in policy reform efforts in California:

- policies regulating student transfer from community colleges to public universities
- a comprehensive student data system covering students in kindergarten through graduate study
- standardized policies for assessment, placement, and remediation in the Florida College System (FCS)
- statewide program standards for Career and Technical Education (CTE) certificates and degrees.

Florida's Higher Education System

The **State University System of Florida** (SUSF) includes 11 universities governed by a Board of Governors (BOG) appointed by the Governor. Each university is administered by a Board of Trustees, with members appointed by the Governor and the BOG. The BOG establishes the powers and duties of the institutional boards. Total undergraduate enrollment is about 245,000 (170,000 FTE), and the system awards just under 50,000 bachelor's degrees annually.

The **Florida College System** (FCS; until recently called the Florida Community College System) includes 28 colleges governed by the state's Board of Education (which also governs the K-12 system). Each open-access college is governed by a Board of Trustees subject to the rules of the Board of Education, with members appointed by the Governor. System enrollment is about 900,000 (about 410,000 FTE, not including students in adult education/GED programs). The system awards about 40,000 AA degrees, 12,000 AS/AAS degrees, and 21,000 certificates annually, along with about 1,000 bachelor's degrees (14 colleges currently have bachelor's programs).

2+2 = Transfer Success

Florida's "2+2" transfer policies date back to 1957 legislation that established the community college system and mandated strong articulation with the universities. Many of the universities were established as upper-division institutions, with all baccalaureate students expected to begin in a community college, necessitating a seamless transfer process defined by several policies implemented through legislation over time:

- The Statewide Course Numbering System assigns common numbers to courses offered at public vocational-technical centers, community colleges, universities, and participating private institutions based on course content. The system is maintained by the Articulation Coordinating Committee (ACC) of the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), working with the State University System of Florida's (SUSF) Board of Governors.
- The AA is designated as a transfer degree consisting of 36 semester credits of general education (GE) and 24 credits of lower-division major preparation and electives. Students who complete the AA are guaranteed admission to a public university (not a specific campus or program), completion of GE, and junior status. They are guaranteed an equal opportunity to compete with native university students for admission to limited-access programs.
- The ACC maintains a list of common prerequisites by major that public universities are obligated to recognize as fulfilling admission requirements for transfer students. Discipline committees comprised of articulation officers and faculty from both FCS and SUSF institutions make recommendations about the prerequisites, with final approval by the ACC.
- Students have access to information about all transfer requirements on the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students website (FACTS.org), which includes automated advising audits that allow students to compare their transcripts (including courses taken and GPA) to AA degree and transfer requirements.

According to a recent analysis, **70% of Florida students who complete the AA transfer to a university**, primarily to one of the SUSF institutions. Among those who did not transfer, only 2% were denied admission to all institutions where they applied, while most did not apply for admission.

K-20 Data System Allows Student Tracking

Florida's K-20 Education Data Warehouse (EDW) integrates data from the state's 67 K-12 school districts, the FCS, and the SUSF. It includes data on students, teachers and faculty, and institutions and their physical facilities. In order to obtain such a broad set of data, the EDW gathers data from a variety of organizations in addition to the state's education agencies, including the National Student Clearinghouse, the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI), various professional licensing boards, and corrections and social service agencies. The EDW was developed to serve the information needs of policymakers, public education systems, and the public. To facilitate links between education and workforce data, Florida created the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program under the oversight of the FLDOE, with agreements that allow the AWI to match education records to employment records without violating federal laws on maintaining students' privacy.

Standardized Assessment Process Signals College Readiness Standards

The 28 colleges of the FCS use a common placement test, known as the Florida College Entry-Level Placement Test (CPT), to assess the skills of entering students in reading, writing, and math. (Few students in the SUSF are required to take the CPT since admission requirements in the system result in most students having college admissions test scores—SAT or ACT—high enough to exempt them from placement testing.) All entering FCS students must take the placement test, and all 28 colleges use the same "cut score" to designate the level of performance students must demonstrate to avoid mandatory placement in remedial coursework.

Recent legislation requires K-12 school districts to offer administration of the placement test to 11th grade students to get an indication of their readiness for college. Students who pass the test are exempt from further placement testing. The FCS has developed special curricula for school districts to offer remedial courses in 12th grade for students who need them, with the same standards used to indicate a student's readiness for college-level courses. This new curricula became available for districts in the current academic year, and 20 of the 67 districts are offering remedial courses, with expectations that all 67 will do so within 3 to 5 years.

Florida's assessment and placement policies send clear signals about college readiness standards to students and their families as well as high school teachers and

counselors and should reduce the need for colleges to provide remedial education. Florida has been using the College Board’s Accuplacer test, but is creating a customized test tied to the state’s K-12 curriculum standards. The new test will be diagnostic, indicating students’ areas of weakness, allowing colleges to modularize remedial coursework so that students only have to take sections related to their specific deficiencies. The state hopes this will increase the portion of students that successfully complete remediation (currently about 50%).

Statewide Standards for CTE Send Clear Signals to Employers

The Division of Career and Adult Education in the FLDOE develops curriculum frameworks for each vocational program offered in the FCS and in the state’s 44 technical centers operated by K-12 districts. The frameworks specify the standards for all certificates (in both technical centers and community colleges) and AS/AAS degrees (only offered in the colleges), including the technical and academic competencies, program lengths (credits), minimum basic skill levels for students, and required instructor certifications. The standards require that course requirements for certificates count toward related associate degree programs and that GE credits within the associate of science degree be transferable. The frameworks are updated every three years in consultation with industry and business. Colleges decide which CTE programs to offer based on local needs, and design their courses and delivery of instruction according to local preferences as long as the total program meets the statewide standards. But the standardized curriculum frameworks send clear signals to employers about the meaning of each career-oriented certificate and degree.

Different Policy, Political, and Governance Contexts Pose Challenges for Adopting These Promising Approaches in California

The policies described here are all formalized in Florida state law. In some cases, they grew out of the initial creation of the public colleges and universities, as in the case of the 2+2 transfer policy. Since the institutions were created, the historically low tuition and high state support for public higher education have been used by the legislature as leverage in imposing statewide requirements and standards. While California has also historically had low tuition (fees) and high state support, the state’s legislature has not used that as effectively in setting policy for higher education, perhaps because the traditions of

shared governance in the state’s colleges and universities and the influence of strong faculty unions. Faculty unions are not as strong in Florida, at least in part due

Florida Faces Struggles in Other Areas

The policies highlighted in this brief are not meant to suggest that Florida has all the answers for higher education. Florida continues to have significant challenges in educating its growing and diverse population:

- **Absence of comprehensive coordination**
The Board of Governors administers the SUSF, while the K-12 districts and the FCS are governed by the FLBOE. There is no coordinating body over all of postsecondary education.
- **Weak accountability system**
The legislature requires some reporting by public colleges and universities on student progress and outcomes, but the reports generate little legislative attention or activity. Florida has twice attempted to introduce performance elements into its postsecondary funding approaches, but dropped the efforts in the face of budget constraints and an inability to increase the allocations for performance to reward improved outcomes.
- **Significant budget cuts and large tuition increases**
Colleges and universities in Florida are struggling to serve more students with fewer resources. While FTE enrollment increased by more than 12% over the last five years, cuts related to the current recession have resulted in a 16.5% decrease in state support since 2008. Tuition increased in 2009-10 by 11.3% for public colleges and 14.6% for the universities over last year.
- **Continuing debate over bachelor’s degree programs in the Florida College System**
Bachelor’s degree programs in the FCS are primarily Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degrees in technical areas that SUSF institutions would be unlikely to offer. But some programs in education and nursing are similar to those in the universities, and debate continues over whether the FCS programs are really addressing unmet needs in the state or are evidence of “mission creep” that introduces unnecessary competition and reduces efficiency.

to a decades-old state law calling for forfeiture of public pensions for any strike among public employees.

Governance structures have also contributed to Florida's more standardized policies. For example, local trustees of both colleges and universities are appointed by the governor rather than locally elected as in the California system. Also, the Division of Career and Adult Education within the FLDOE has its own chancellor at the same level as the chancellors of the FCS and the K-12 system, with responsibility for CTE certificate and degree programs offered in both of those systems, making the development of standardized curricula easier than it would be in California.

Some of Florida's policies have built on the foundations of earlier policy. The Statewide Course Numbering System, a significant accomplishment at the time it was developed in the 1960s, eased the process of developing and imposing common prerequisites for transfer in the 1990s. California has not been able to develop a common numbering system across public higher education (or even across institutions within the same system).

California Must Begin Reforms

Many states have demonstrated a willingness to enact significant education reforms in order to improve student outcomes, increase degree completion, and raise educational attainment levels. California is beginning to pay a steep price for lagging behind these other states, as external funders become increasingly hesitant to invest in a state seen as resistant to change. This report has focused on Florida which, in spite of its ongoing challenges, has gained a reputation for demonstrating a commitment to making tough choices in pursuit of improved postsecondary outcomes. The common thread running through the four areas of Florida policy highlighted here is the use of more standardized policies and processes to make the postsecondary system work better for students and serve state needs. While the specific elements of policy might vary, California should consider the examples from Florida in making policy choices that strike the right balance between the interests of institutions and their local communities, and the needs of students and the larger California society.

Barriers to college completion need to be removed. In transfer, we should promote bold statewide policy solutions that are student-centered and provide an

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easy-to-understand transfer pathway that helps more community college students meet their educational goals. Specifically, California should develop associate's degrees designed for transfer in individual major fields. The degrees would provide a consistent, statewide pathway (not region by region) from its community colleges to its public four-year universities in order to improve statewide coordination and significantly improve the efficiency of the transfer process and the state's future economic prosperity.