

OPINIONS

Putting ‘community’ into community colleges



Students attending class at Glendale Community College. (Photo: Wayne Thom)

by **JAMES MAYER** posted 11.19.2015

The leaders of California’s vast community college system this week unanimously adopted a reform agenda with amazing ease – given how fundamentally hard the decision was to engineer.

The Board of Governors’ decision – to endorse comprehensive recommendations to better align career technical education (CTE) programs with the workforce needs of California’s employers – could be the linchpin in a more strategic statewide effort to reduce poverty and reverse the growing opportunity and income gaps.

The next heavy lift will be for faculty and administrators from 113 colleges to coordinate their efforts to evolve and adapt programs to provide the precise skills needed by employers.

California is expected to have openings for an additional 1 million qualified workers over the next decade than the existing college programs can produce. These jobs are in health care, technology, production and goods movement. Many of them could be in firms designing and building the technologies that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions inside and outside of California.

These jobs are above minimum wage and have career ladders. They require more than a high school diploma and less than a bachelor's degree. This is not higher education's only opportunity to secure California's prosperity, but this career path is the best opportunity for anyone not headed to a four-year university.

Participants in the CA Economic Summit – who were deeply involved in developing the recommendations – committed at the 2015 Summit in Ontario this month to support enactment in the capital and to support, promote and even insist on diligent implementation in the regions – as if the financial health of 1 million Californian families depended upon it.

The next heavy lift will be for faculty and administrators from 113 colleges to coordinate their efforts to evolve and adapt programs to provide the precise skills needed by employers trying to succeed in radically changing markets, defined by rapidly evolving technologies, in the context of ruthless economic forces.

At the same time, the process of engineering this milestone is instructive for anyone who is frustrated by the tragic gap between government's current response to many harmful and stubborn socio-economic problems and what is possible through smarter policies, practices and partnerships.

Whether driven by climate change or global competition, leaders are universally concerned about adaptation. In most cases, enterprises must evolve to changing environments – markets, demographics, technologies – to survive. And in all cases, this evolution is essential to thrive.

Yet government agencies – responsible for providing “public goods” – are genetically disposed to stasis.



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So when a significant public entity – one with complex internal politics and a diffuse governance structure – begins to evolve, publicly minded leaders should pay attention.

This effort began quietly more than four years ago in the Chancellor's staid office building on Q Street in Sacramento. A new vice chancellor for workforce, Van Ton-Quinlivan, had joined the executive team from Pacific Gas and Electric and knew

firsthand the missed opportunity of not providing adequate programs for “middle skilled jobs.”

Over the course of two years, Ton-Quinlivan convened advisors from the colleges, the employment and the civic sectors. She leveraged small pots of funds and technical support to animate the frustrated ambitions of many at the colleges to regionally coordinate planning and grant applications.

The regional consortia identified “industry clusters” that were important to their regional economies – advanced manufacturing; advanced transportation and renewables; agriculture, water and environmental technologies, and those are just the “As.” The sectors were staffed with “navigators,” who convene employers, administrators and faculty to align resources and curricula.

In 2014, the Legislature allocated \$50 million in “one-time” money to help improve the capacity of the colleges to serve CTE students – which was used to build a broader understanding that the colleges must cooperate to serve students and meet employer needs.

When a year ago, several members of the Board of Governors decried the slow pace of progress, Chancellor Brice Harris seized the moment to convene a task force – 13 “internal” stakeholders (representatives of every flavor of faculty and administration) and 13 “external” stakeholders, from the ACLU to the CA Chamber of Commerce.

Eleven regional meetings were held at colleges, so faculty and administrators could raise their issues – along with three other meetings just for faculty. Six regional business groups aligned through the CA Economic Summit held town hall meetings to gather public comments and then later to review the draft recommendations.

Over seven months, the task force met five times and hammered out recommendations that were unanimously supported. Plenty of side meetings and shuttle diplomacy paved the way for support through the normally grueling internal “shared governance” consultations.

This is a highly abbreviated description of a process that was carefully designed and managed to be respectful of the colleges’ culture, while enabling employers to identify the significant improvements that will be necessary for the colleges to fulfill their mission.

The early work – regional consortia, sector navigators, the one-time capacity funds – had normed the colleges to the major elements of significant reform: data-driven needs assessments, curricula evolving to stay aligned with rapidly changing skill requirements, regional cooperation, more flexibility in recruiting qualified instructors, and more money dedicated to programs that are more expensive to offer than traditional classroom work.

The Board of Governor’s action on Monday is being described as a celebration. But hard and strategically incremental work made for the easy decision.

As with all major milestones, there is plenty of mountain left to climb. The colleges will need to significantly amp up their partnerships with employers and their regional collaboration. Trustees will need to make difficult decisions to curtail some programs and grow others.

And of equal importance, private, public and civic sector leaders must come together on a regional scale as stewards to set community expectations for the colleges to sustain and even accelerate this evolution to prioritize skills that prepare Californians for high quality jobs.

The thoughtful path chartered so far can help guide the course ahead. But so should the growing realization that the consequences of the status quo are unacceptable to virtually everyone – and the need to adapt programs, staffing and funding will be essential for the colleges to restore their historic role in supporting the California Dream.

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Ed's Note: James Mayer is president and CEO of CA Fwd, a non-profit, bipartisan government reform organization.