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ARE BROAD ACCESS INSTITUTIONS PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CALIFORNIA'S LABOR MARKET?



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When many people think about college, images of young and eager students studying and living on campus and graduating in four years usually come to mind. In fact, when you search for “college student” in Google images, these are the types of stock photos that come up. However, through my participation in college and career readiness research at the Gardner Center, I know that only a minority of today’s college-goers fit this stereotype. Today’s students tend to be older, come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, live off-campus, and work part-time while going to school (NCES, 2010). And, most are pursuing their education at regional *broad-access institutions* that accept a majority of students

who apply, including two-year community colleges, less-selective four-year public colleges, and proprietary schools (Barrow, Brock, & Rouse, 2013).

Understanding the role these broad-access institutions play in preparing students for California’s labor market is critical, and is the subject of a study underway at the Gardner Center in collaboration with professors Mike Kirst and Dick Scott at the Graduate School of Education. California’s public higher education system is struggling to recover from years of financial strains. Budget shortfalls have resulted in aging infrastructure, reductions in core classes, tuition and fee increases, and staff furloughs, among other constraints (California Legislative Analyst’s Office [LAO], 2011). Moreover, population and education trends suggest that by 2025, 41% of jobs will require at least an undergraduate education, but only about 35% of working-age adults will have earned a bachelor’s degree (Bohn, 2014). Without significant reform to California’s higher education system, the state will continue experiencing a shortage of educated workers to fill jobs in an increasingly knowledge-based economy (Finney, Riso, Orosz, & Boland, 2014; Bohn, 2014; LAO, 2011). Because a majority of California’s college students are enrolled in broad-access institutions, deeper knowledge about these specific colleges may help inform policy efforts that help improve prosperity for the majority of Californians (Kirst, Stevens, & Proctor, 2010; Stevens, Proctor, Klasik, & Baker, 2011).

If the state’s economy is to thrive, comprehensive, research-driven reforms to the public higher education system are warranted to address the “skills gap” that looms over California.

Adopting the Gardner Center’s tri-level perspective, our research on broad-access institutions suggests that these colleges face an array of difficult and interrelated challenges at the system, setting, and individual levels, and that crafting effective solutions will require reforms at all three. For instance, the state’s community college system has been criticized for being slow to respond to the rapid demands of the technology labor market, which constantly requires new skills. Inflexibility in modifying or approving new courses of study (e.g., professional-technical programs), rigid accreditation requirements, and few systemic incentives for regional collaborations with businesses, among other practices have hindered its ability to be market responsive.

Setting-level issues at broad-access colleges such as over-subscribed or “impacted” credit-bearing courses (usually in sciences, engineering, and math), diminishing support structures for first-time students (e.g., career/placement centers), and a dearth of internship opportunities and local industry partnerships have constrained the colleges’ ability to adequately train their students for the job market.

Finally, at the individual level, students attending broad-access institutions often arrive under-prepared for the rigors of college-level work. Our research on the [College Readiness Indicator Systems](#) initiative demonstrates that K-12 systems face entrenched obstacles in being able to graduate students who understand the complexities and demands of college and who have the academic skills, tenacity, and habits of mind necessary to perform well and persist to graduation.

With the average earnings of college graduates almost twice as high as those with a high school diploma, many see higher education as their ticket to upward economic and social mobility. As the baby boomers retire, California will need significantly more well-trained and college-educated workers. A sparsely educated public cannot sustain true economic, social, or cultural prosperity. If the state’s economy is to thrive, comprehensive, research-driven reforms at the system, setting, and individual levels to the state’s public higher education system—particularly to its broad-access institutions which serve the majority of students in the state—are warranted to address the “skills gap” that looms over California.

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