

Students Talk Back panel takes on higher education



By JOHN WALKER
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The Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics continued its Students Talk Back event in the Ronald Tutor Campus Center on Wednesday afternoon with a discussion entitled, “The Cost of Higher Education: The Community College Debate, Student Loans and Rising Tuition,” which focused on issues of community college tuition in the wake of President Barack Obama’s proposal to make tuition free for community college students.

The panel featured Larry Gordon, higher education reporter for the Los Angeles Times; Dr. Bill Scroggins, President of Mt. San Antonio College, the largest community college in California; Samantha Archie, involvement director of USC College Democrats; and Brian Burley; a member of the USC College Republicans.

Co-moderators included Kerstyn Olsen, director of the Unruh Institute, and Sarah Dhanaphatana, news editor of the Daily Trojan.

The panel opened with a question about the current state of community college in California and how the attraction of free tuition might dissuade students from completing their degree.

Dhanaphatana began by listing statistical information released by the L.A. Times to inform the audience on numerical issues regarding community college enrollment.

“About half the students enrolled in California community colleges take more than four years to graduate,” Dhanaphatana quoted. “Among full time students who entered

community college in 2007, over 35,000 had not earned their degrees within three years and most were not currently enrolled in college”.

However, Gordon did not view the discouraging statistics as a product of poor financial aid.

“Tuition in California for community colleges is the lowest in the country by far,” Gordon said.

Instead, he argued that the reason why so many people drop out of community college is because kids are not adequately prepared by their high school education. Therefore, difficult college courses discourage kids from continuing their education.

The conversation then shifted over to the criticism that Obama’s free college tuition initiative would encourage students to attend community college for free even if they were admitted to an accredited four year institution.

Scroggins disagreed, referring to how completion for transfer requirements do take significantly longer.

“Of [students who attend community college full time despite being admitted to a four year institution], within three years 70 percent of them complete the requirements for transfer, so I don’t think the criticism that [community colleges] are not a good avenue to transfer is a valid criticism of Obama’s proposal,” Scroggins said.

Olsen then asked how Obama’s proposal might affect overall student debt.

“Some of [Obama’s] opponents have criticized this proposal saying that it doesn’t have a lot of details on how it would be financed,” Olsen said.

Both Burley and Gordon agreed that the financial aid programs the country uses currently such as, Pell and Cal grants, need to be augmented in addition to Obama’s programs.

“Investment has not kept up with the cost of education,” Gordon said.

Burley expanded on the idea by suggesting that the country should reinvest in high school education when it connects to higher education.

According to Burley this would better prepare students for what to expect from the college experience.

“It would enhance our high school education and would give people the opportunity to know what they want to major in,” Burley said.

The conversation then shifted topics to the correlation between Obama’s community college initiative and the supposed “skills gap” between California workers.

Scroggins explained that the community college initiative does not fix the issue of the skills barrier.

“I think that providing a free avenue to access community colleges doesn’t address the main issue of a skills gap,” Scroggins said. “What we need are incentives for colleges to align their curriculum with the needs of employers, and for employers to be part of the education system.”

The final question of the event discussed the idea of 15 California community colleges starting to offer bachelor’s degrees.

Burley was in favor of the idea and explained that offering bachelor’s degrees in community colleges will result in higher skilled workers and wages.

“I think Obama’s pushing this so much, and as a result the work force will be more skilled,” Burley said. “I think Any time you do that you have higher skilled workers, higher wages. I think that’s the big positive.”

Scroggins agreed, but explained that the 21 states that offer bachelor’s degrees through community colleges fail to recognize that technical majors require a longer period of training.

“So 21 states around the nation — a lot of community colleges offer bachelor’s degrees, but they’re not in philosophy,” Scroggins said. “They’re in technical and applied fields, and those fields really require more and more training. To be a computer technician, or to be a medical lab technician, or to be a registered nurse, two years isn’t enough anymore.”

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