

Can community colleges deliver on diplomas?

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California's politicians and educators are getting serious about how to solve an immense and vexing problem — the graduation rate at community colleges.

Until now, nothing has worked — indeed, the graduation rate slipped 1% over the last decade. Shockingly, [research](#) shows that 70% of California's 2.1 million community college students neither earn a two-year associate degree nor transfer to a four-year school in six years.

Historically, funding for the state's 114 community colleges was based on enrollment. But starting this fall, 40% of the state dollars a college receives will depend on whether the institution improves student outcomes and how well it serves poor students. This threat of what would amount to a massive budget cut for schools that make little progress will oblige every community college to make students' success a top priority.

But how exactly are the colleges going to change their ways?

The state is putting muscle — which is to say money — behind evidence-based strategies to boost graduation rates. And its choices are good ones: The plans attack three of the biggest barriers between students and a diploma.

Creating momentum.

Data [show](#) that the graduation rate for full-time students is at least a third higher than for those who attend part time. Full-timers have a [better shot](#) at graduating than part-timers even if they maintain this pace for only a single semester or fail a class. They're less liable to be derailed by a family crisis or financial misfortune and more prone to spend time on campus, where they can get tutoring and counseling, as well as making a more lasting connection with their professors and classmates.

To persuade more students to go to school full time, California will help them financially. Students eligible for needs-based federal or state financial aid and who take a 15-credit course load each semester will receive a \$4,000 grant a year, an expansion of an earlier, under-publicized \$2,500 award. To earn that much money at a minimum-wage job, a student would have to work nearly 400 hours, which is one reason school gets back-burnered. These full-time students also won't pay tuition for their first year of school.

Fixing remedial education.

Based on a test that's administered at the start of their freshman year, [80% of community college students](#) are consigned to remedial math or English. Fewer than half will pass the math course; 60% will pass in English. Frustrated, many drop out before they get a crack at classes that lead to a degree.

This problem is especially acute for minority students. Here's a hair-on-fire [fact](#) — just 1% of African American students and 2% of Latino students relegated to the lowest level of remedial math in 2014 passed an entry-level college math class needed for graduation two years later.

With [a bill](#) that passed last year, the state is forcing colleges [to junk](#) most of these dead-end courses. Instead, except for the weakest freshmen, students must be enrolled in college-credit classes, with access to tutoring or other help, as needed.

Providing a road map to graduation.

Many community college students are clueless about what courses they need to graduate. With no one at the college to direct them — a typical counselor has the impossible burden of advising 1,500 students — they drift. Discouraged by the lack of progress, they leave. The 2017-18 state budget included \$150 million for an [initiative](#) called Guided Pathways that enables the colleges to create online road maps that inform students about which classes they need to graduate and how to sequence them so that prerequisites don't hinder their progress.

These maps will also be designed to mesh with the expectations of four-year institutions. The state universities and the UC system campuses have agreed to guarantee slots for community college graduates who have done the course work and gotten the grades that meet their academic requirements for juniors. Three dozen private colleges and universities recently made the same pledge. (Stanford and USC were among the notable exceptions.)

A year ago, Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the state's community colleges, pushed the Board of Governors to approve [new goals for the system](#): a 20% increase in community college graduates and a 35% increase in transfers to the state universities over the next four years. If the community colleges "can't organize ourselves in a way that catches up with the demand" for graduates, Ortiz Oakley said, "we are going to make ourselves irrelevant."

Tying community college funding to graduation and transfer rates, and at the same time giving the schools the tools needed to get students across the finish line, should make progress toward the chancellor's goal. If the state's latest carrot-and-stick approach works, we will have stanchd a California brain drain.

David L. Kirp is a professor of the Graduate School at UC Berkeley and a senior scholar at the Learning Policy Institute.