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Opinion Editorial

Community Colleges – California’s Greatest Success Story

By: Jerry Patterson, President, Board of Trustees, Coast Community College District

The recent report from the Institute for Higher Education in Leadership and Policy regarding the “poor” success rates for community colleges and the subsequent articles and editorials are extraordinarily myopic in scope because they inaccurately measure whether or not a degree was obtained, which is only “one leg of the stool.” This may be the right measure for a four year college, but community colleges are much more diverse. For us, the other two legs are workforce development and basic skills. The report itself is flawed in that it tries to look at community colleges through the lens of a four-year university and does not accurately reflect the whole story. Within my own family, we have all attended a local community college which has helped us in ways that are not considered successful by the report’s standards. I’ll bet many of your readers have similar stories.

Some of our students’ successes are not easily measured, but are equally important to Orange County. Many students come to our campuses to improve or learn new job skills, brush up on basic skills, learn English or study a vocational trade. Just taking a few classes at a community college to improve skills can result in a 21% gain in income for high school graduates and a 57% gain for those that have not completed high school, according to the US Census Bureau. These students and our colleges, however, are not considered “successful” because they did not graduate with an associate’s degree or certificate and they did not transfer to a four-year university.

Here’s my story. I attended a community college in order to raise my grade point average to be accepted to a four-year institution. By entering community college and obtaining a 4.0 GPA, I was accepted to Cal State Long Beach and graduated with honors. I went on to UCLA Law School and have been a mayor and a United States Congressman. Yet, I am considered a failure according to recent reports.

My wife’s family could not afford to send her to a four-year college, so she attended a community college for two years and transferred to UC Berkeley and graduated with honors. Because she did not obtain an AA degree, she is considered a failure by the flawed study.

My wife, Linda Moulton-Patterson has served as the mayor of Huntington Beach and was a governor's appointment to the Environmental Protection Agency. She is the first woman to chair, and the longest serving Chairperson, of the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

My daughters have taken classes at Orange Coast College and Golden West College to qualify for promotional opportunities and to learn new skills which have benefited them and rendered them more valuable (and better paid) employees with more marketable career skills. Both of them have earned bachelor's degrees and alas, are considered failures because neither of them obtained an AA degree or certificate.

My family's story is not to suggest that an AA degree is unimportant, but that community colleges are in the education business, not the degree business. The final test is student success – having their lives enhanced by an education that opens doors to opportunity.

Within Orange County, our community college students enjoy some of the highest success rates in the state. The colleges within the Coast Community College District are among the state's top performers in awarding certificates and degrees and in transferring students to four-year universities within the county and throughout the state. Transferring students is only a part of our mission, yet it seems to be the only tool by which we are measured. It is true that we sometimes struggle to accomplish our multi-faceted mission, but we know that it can be boiled down to one job – ensuring the success of our students.

A part of that job is to provide associate's degrees and transfer-level programs, and we are doing that job very well. Coastline Community College, Golden West College and Orange Coast College award over 3,000 associate's degrees a year. In the past two years, Orange Coast College has transferred more students to California State University schools than any other two-year institution in the state.

Coast community colleges provide training for nurses, police officers, healthcare specialists, diesel engine mechanics and many others who may not require a "traditional" college education. However, the demands of today's economy mean that almost all workers need some kind of specialized training to land a job that can support a family. These often overlooked programs – which are not always counted in our "success rates" – provide sought after skills that allow students to immediately enter the workforce earning good wages.

Our community colleges are vital to the economic viability of our county and our state, and they are the best deal in town for taxpayers. An economic study conducted last year shows that for every dollar taxpayers invest in Orange County's community colleges, they receive \$3 back in increased productivity and avoided social costs associated with welfare, crime and poor health.

California community colleges represent the largest and most efficient educational system in the country. We provide all of these opportunities for less funding per student than any other educational institution. More importantly, we provide our students with the knowledge and skills they need to be a success, whether or not recent reports agree. Now, tell me your story.

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The Coast Community College District is the ninth largest community college district in the state in credit enrollment, serving 60,000 students each semester. The district is comprised of Coastline Community College headquartered in Fountain Valley, Golden West College in Huntington Beach and Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa.