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More students delaying college

Fewer in state going right after high school, study finds

By Eric Stern - Bee Staff Writer

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Sacramento State researchers have found a declining percentage of California students going to college directly after high school, and called for efforts to promote a "college-going culture" as early as elementary school.

"There is no substitute for an educated populace in California's drive for economic and social health," according to the report by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, at California State University, Sacramento.

The portion of California students going to college immediately after high school dropped from 61 percent to 52 percent over the last 10 years, according to the "State of Decline" study.

California ranks 40th among states in the rate of high school graduates going directly to college.

Nancy Shulock, director of the CSUS think tank that compiled the report, acknowledges that many students in California do go to college later in life. In fact, the state ranks at the top nationally in overall college participation because older students take classes part-time at low-cost community colleges.

But CSUS researchers argue that enrolling directly after high school -- attending continuously, taking classes full-time and working less than 20 hours a week -- offers the best chance of completing a degree. California is 47th among states in the number of the certificates and degrees granted per 100 undergraduates.

"We have a lot of students going, but we have few who are finishing," Shulock said. "We're very accommodating of older adults returning to college, but we do it in a way that doesn't foster their success. It's best to be prepared and go to college early."

CSUS researchers said the declining trend of students entering traditional educational pipelines is particularly troublesome as the state's working-age population grows increasingly Latino. Gaps in college participation and completion are more pronounced among Latino and black students, the study found.

In California, nearly half of the 18-year-old population is black or Latino, but only one-fourth of undergraduate certificates and degrees are awarded to black or Latino students.

However, some college officials say the traditional pipeline is idealistic, not realistic.

"There are a whole lot of folks who may not come to us directly out of high school," said Brice W. Harris, chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District, with four campuses in the Sacramento area.

Community colleges are expecting a massive enrollment boom over the next 10 years, mostly from older students going back to school. State researchers say community colleges will serve more than 2.1 million students in California by 2014, a 27 percent increase from today.

The report's authors said the high school-to-college pipeline can be improved, in part, by steering students to more advanced science and math courses such as algebra by the eighth grade.

It's an idea already embraced by the California State University system, which has been testing 11th graders for college readiness since 2004, to keep them on track for college-level classes -- and out of remedial courses.

George Caplan, president of the statewide community college board, has started talking about assessing students as early as elementary school.

The "State of Decline" study also broke down college-going rates by region in the state.

The rate of students going to college directly out of high school varies from a low of 23 percent in the upper Sacramento Valley to a high of 67 percent in the Central Coast area.

Sacramento-area students -- from Alpine, Amador, El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo and Yuba counties -- fare slightly better than the statewide average, 56 to 52 percent.

The report showed rural and Latino areas fared worse, while areas with a higher population of Asians and higher income levels fared better.

Shulock said California used to be called a state of opportunity. But unless policymakers and educators work at getting more students in and through college, "we will in fact see a decline in the economic and social health of the state of California."

At a glance

- The portion of California students going to college immediately after high school has dropped from 61 percent to 52 percent over the last 10 years.
- California ranks 40th among states in the rate of high school graduates going directly to college.
- To read the full report, go to www.csus.edu/ihe

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