

## *How Should California's Community Colleges Be Evaluated?*

Although California's community colleges have traditionally received funding based on student enrollment, recent federal and state legislation requires that some funding be linked to student performance. That legislation seeks to improve resource allocation by identifying colleges whose programs require remedial action or sanctions. Although many policymakers support that goal, performance standards applied uniformly across community colleges may be counterproductive if they do not accommodate the various missions that community colleges have taken on. That possibility raises a basic question: To what extent do California's community colleges choose different missions?

In *Evaluating Academic Programs in California's Community Colleges*, Andrew M. Gill and Duane E. Leigh answer that question by breaking it into three smaller ones.

- How do colleges differ in their academic program offerings?
- Do college-specific characteristics and community needs explain these differences?
- If so, can these explanations help policymakers design guidelines for evaluating community college performance?

The authors find that although community colleges are heavily engaged in offering credits that transfer to four-year colleges, over 40 percent specialize in one way or another. They also find that program emphases and specializations are associated with a small set of community and college-specific characteristics, including local labor market conditions, proximity to four-year institutions, and membership in a multicampus district. Given the range of missions observed across campuses, the authors maintain that a "one-size-fits-all" strategy for evaluating community colleges may not be appropriate.

### *Program Differences Across Community Colleges*

The size and complexity of the California Community College System (CCCS) make it likely that individual colleges will choose different missions. To capture those differences, the authors collected quantitative data on curriculum mixes measured in terms of credits, courses, programs, and the interests of freshman students for all 108 CCCS campuses. They then analyzed these data against a backdrop of local labor market conditions, demographic statistics, and college-specific characteristics such as membership in a multicampus community college district and proximity to a four-year college.

The authors found that most credits offered by most community colleges are transferable to four-year colleges. They note, however, that both vocational education (voc-ed) programs and traditional academic programs generate these credits. Transferable voc-ed offerings are increasingly common in California and nationwide, and California community colleges differ in their emphasis on them. The authors also found, however, that many community colleges stress voc-ed offerings that do not transfer to four-year institutions. They estimate that 19 of California's 108 community colleges emphasize nontransferable voc-ed credits and de-emphasize transfer credits, whereas 26 community colleges do the opposite.

College-specific characteristics and community needs explain many of the observed differences in curriculum emphasis and specialization. Colleges that specialize in either a transferable curriculum or in nontransferable voc-ed offerings are more likely to belong to multicampus districts and to be located in large labor markets. Colleges that focus on transfers tend to be closer to a University of California or a California State University campus. Those that specialize in

nontransferable voc-ed tend to have a larger proportion of Latino students and to be located in larger communities with greater minority populations.

### *Policy Considerations*

The authors recommend that several factors be kept in mind when evaluating the performance of California's community colleges.

- On average, California community colleges offer more credits in transferable programs than in other broad curriculum categories; basic skills programs account for a relatively small proportion of total credits.
- Despite the emphasis on transferable courses, transfer rates alone are not sufficient for evaluating performance. A successful outcome for colleges specializing in transferable voc-ed, for example, might be placement in training-related jobs.
- Differences in specializations and emphases suggest that a "one-size-fits-all" evaluation strategy is not appropri-

ate—especially given the link between missions on the one hand and college-specific characteristics and community needs on the other.

The authors conclude by describing two possible approaches to evaluating community college performance. The first allows common performance standards to be adjusted to quantitative differences in student characteristics and local economic conditions. This approach resembles that of the Job Training Partnership Act, which regulated federal employment and training activities for most of the 1980s and 1990s. Under the second approach, the state would recognize at the outset that community colleges differ in their missions. Rather than adjusting common standards to respond to local conditions, this approach would allow community colleges to report performance data deemed consistent with their missions. This approach is in keeping with recent steps taken by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and a recent bill in Congress (H.R. 1261). Should California adopt this approach to performance evaluation, the methods developed in this report may be helpful in measuring differences in missions across community colleges.

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*This research brief summarizes a report by Andrew M. Gill and Duane E. Leigh, Evaluating Academic Programs in California's Community Colleges (2004, 102 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-100-7). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*

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