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**REFORM AND REACTION:
The Politics of Modern Higher Education Policy**

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ABSTRACT

An ongoing debate in K-12 education policy has been between the “reform” agenda, including charter schools and school vouchers, and advocates of traditional public schools, led by educator unions. A similar split has emerged in higher education, particularly community colleges. Using California as an example, this paper: 1) summarizes the evolution of the current political divide between advocates of the “completion and success” agenda and faculty-led opponents, including the major reforms involved, 2) discusses the claims that leading organizations on each side have made, including their policy priorities, and 3) argues that the two sides share do share some areas of mutual agreement. The paper concludes by noting future policy considerations that could complicate reform efforts.

Keywords: community colleges, higher education, education policy, education reform, philanthropy

INTRODUCTION

One of the prevailing debates in education policy in the 21st century has taken place among so-called education “reformers,” including those who advocate for charter schools, and/or school vouchers, and opponents who instead favor stronger funding of traditional public schools (Jason, 2017; Morabito, 2022). Some of the most prominent backers of the education reform movement include philanthropic foundations funded largely by extremely wealthy individuals and corporations, such as Microsoft founder Bill Gates (Ho, 2018). Advocates of funding traditional public schools, often led by teachers’ unions, criticize both charter schools and vouchers as representing “privatization” of public education by for-profit interests (Flannery, 2020).

Even where such reform advocates do not explicitly focus on charter schools or vouchers, the involvement of so-called “philanthro-capitalists” (a term that will be revisited later) has come under fire: “as the private sector plays an ever-larger role in public institutions, like public education, it erodes the primacy of the state” (Schwab, 2023, p. 217). The debate has polarized not just policymakers and educators but the public as well; a 2019 survey showed that Californians were nearly evenly split on the issue of charter schools, with 49% supporting charters and 46% opposing (Dykman, 2019). Indeed, the debate about “school choice” (as it is often called by proponents) has grown so heated that multiple politicians and leading philanthropists have called it “the civil rights issue of our time” (Education Next, 2022; Klein & Ujifusa, 2017).

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A policy debate with a very similar divide has been taking place, albeit with much less public attention, in higher education policy, most notably community colleges, in recent years. Much like the K-12 debate over “school choice” versus traditional public schools, the higher education debate pits a reform agenda led by philanthropic foundations (and funded by wealthy individuals and/or corporations, including the aforementioned Gates) against a myriad of concerns and opposition raised in large part by faculty unions and advocacy groups. This debate has been especially pitched with regards to community colleges, where a series of high-profile and controversial reform initiatives have been enacted in recent years (Fain, 2018; Gordon, 2019a; Burke, 2022).

Using California, home to the largest number of community colleges and community college students, as a case study, this paper provides an overview of the history and growth of community colleges in the United States and California; the involvement of philanthropic foundations in promoting a reform agenda, and the backlash from community college faculty groups. The paper also addresses policy areas in which the reform movement and faculty groups have agreed, including proposals for new state investment in students’ basic needs and an expansion of financial aid. Finally, the conclusion highlights a few key areas of ongoing tension, noting major areas that policymakers may have to grapple with if they intend to make the kinds of investments both sides claim to support.

HISTORY AND GROWTH OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges, formerly known as junior colleges and sometimes still referred to as two-year colleges, to distinguish them from four-year institutions (also known as universities), form a large segment of the American higher education landscape. As of the fall of 2021, there were 932 public community colleges in the United States, serving an estimated 10.2 million students - more than 53 percent of the 19 million college students enrolled nationwide (American Association of Community Colleges, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Community colleges were not established organically or by coincidence; the so-called “junior college movement” was a concerted effort coordinated by the leaders of prestigious public and private universities such as the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and California’s flagship institutions Stanford University and the University of California. These leaders worked hard to cultivate political allies and win support for their once-novel idea of the junior college in the early years of the twentieth century; from 1919 to 1939, enrollment in two-year colleges grew from just over 8,000 to nearly 150,000 students, a growth of nearly 18 times over (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

It is commonplace today to view the role of community colleges as preparing students for transfer to a four-year university, where they will complete a baccalaureate degree; 8 in 10 entering community college students indicate their end goal is a bachelor’s degree or higher (Garcia & Adkins, 2021). However, this was far from their original purpose. Indeed, Brint and Karabel (1989) convincingly demonstrate that the four-year university leaders who sponsored the junior college movement and helped spur their spread nationwide were aiming in large part to keep students out of their own institutions. The President of Harvard University stated that “one of the merits of these institutions will be the keeping out of college... young people who have no taste for higher education.” California’s own Robert Sproul, President of the University of California system for nearly three decades, asserted that community colleges should act as “altogether different institutions which will suitably train [less able] students and get them to their life work sooner” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, pp. 35-36).

Sproul, along with Stanford University’s David Starr Jordan, was a big part of the growth of community colleges in California in the first half of the century. By 1929-30, California had nearly as many community

colleges (49) as the entire country had had (52) ten years earlier, and accounted for 24% of all students enrolled nationwide (Brint & Karabel, 1989, pp. 26-28). Sproul and Jordan envisioned a future where one day community colleges would have sole purview over lower-division and general education courses, encompassing the first two years of a college education, allowing four-year universities to focus exclusively on upper-division coursework in specific majors (Boggs 2021a).

While Sproul and Jordan's vision for community colleges would not fully come to pass, the rapidly growing sector did grow to perform two critical missions in the higher education ecosystem by the middle of the twentieth century. In the years immediately after World War II, policymakers were concerned about providing economic and educational opportunities to soldiers returning to the U.S. Spurred by President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy, which called for a college education to be universally available to anyone seeking one, community colleges were charged with preparing university-bound students for transfer to four-year institutions, as well as providing "vocational education" for students seeking to gain advanced skills and enter the workforce rather than obtain a baccalaureate degree (Boggs 2021a). The vocational mission helped secure the support of business leaders for ongoing state and federal funding to expand community colleges, in which California continued to lead the nation. By 1968, 61.2 percent of all undergraduate students in California were enrolled in a community college, the largest share in the United States by nearly 10 percentage points (Brint and Karabel, 1989, p.85).

Despite their rapid growth, community colleges in California did not initially have their own funding or governance structure. Community colleges originated as extensions of public high schools, which were solely responsible for their funding until 1917, when the Legislature first allocated state funds, on a per-student basis, to match locally raised property tax revenues. Even then, community colleges were still governed by local school districts, and under the purview of the California Department of Education (CDE), until the 1960s. In 1961, legislation authorized the formation of community college districts, independent from K-12 districts; in 1967, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors was established, after two studies found that the CDE lacked the authority or leadership to guide the community college system in performing its statewide goals. Unique from the University of California and California State University systems, however, local community college boards of trustees continued to maintain formal governing authority over community colleges (Boggs 2021a; Galizio, 2021).

The funding and mission of California's community colleges both changed dramatically from the late 1970s through the 1980s. In 1978, California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 13, the so-called "taxpayer revolt" that led to a drastic reduction in local property tax rates and thus, in local revenues available to fund both K-12 schools and community colleges (Galizio, 2021). The instant 15% reduction in local revenues for community colleges led the state government to step in to backfill with state dollars; in a single year, the state's share of funding for community colleges increased from 38 percent to 78 percent (Newmyer, 2021). By 1982-83, facing revenue shortfalls at the state level, the Legislature cut funding for courses deemed inessential, leading the statewide Board of Governors to direct community colleges to prioritize "transfer education, associate degrees, certificate programs, and student services... [over] remediation, basic skills, and continuing and community education" (Boggs 2021b, p.33).

THE REFORM MOVEMENT AND ITS RISE

Starting in the early 2000s, a loosely connected, ideologically aligned series of higher education initiatives supported by philanthropic foundations began to take shape and form a new policy movement that I refer to as the Completion and Success Movement (CSM). Among the groups most closely associated with the

CSM include the Campaign for College Opportunity, the Education Trust (and its branch active in California, the Education Trust-West [ETW]), the Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), the California Acceleration Project, and Public Advocates, a legal advocacy organization.

The CSM is not driven by any one single organization or interest group, nor is it affiliated with a single political party, but multiple sources both supportive of and opposed to its policy goals trace its origin to the formation of a nationwide initiative called *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* (ATD) in 2004 (Boggs, 2021b; Bailey et al., 2015; Isserles, 2021). ATD was funded by the nonprofit philanthropic group the Lumina Foundation, in partnership with seven founding partners including the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the primary national trade association representing two-year colleges nationwide. The major goals of ATD were to improve student outcomes - defined as completion of certificates or degrees, and/or successful transfer to four-year universities, improved student persistence (the number of students who continue in college from one semester to the next), and increasing the number of students considered academically prepared for college-level coursework (Bailey et al., 2015; Boggs, 2021b; Isserles, 2021; McClenney, 2013).

The CSM began to fully take shape and become a national movement in the latter years of the first decade of the 2000s, coinciding with the Great Recession - which sent state budget revenues reeling (even worse than the dot-com crash of the early 2000s), forcing even further, and much deeper, cuts to public higher education (Aborn & Cahill, 2020). This is where private philanthropy significantly scaled up its involvement in higher education policy. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates) announced a new initiative supporting innovative college completion practices in 2008, and within five years had invested \$343 million in this area; these funds helped launch pilots such as *competency-based education*, a form of instruction in which students learn through demonstrating competency in a series of skills appropriate to a highly technical, skilled occupation (Bailey et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2013). In 2009, Gates dollars helped establish Complete College America (CCA), a national nonprofit group calling for CSM policies - including performance-based funding, remedial education reforms, and a strong focus on improving student outcomes such as on-time completion. Within a few years, the Lumina Foundation - who had funded the ATD project since 2004 with similar objectives - had joined Gates, along with older philanthropic foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, and Kellogg, in funding CCA's efforts to enact performance-based funding models in several state community college systems (Isserles, 2021).

In addition to advocating for outcomes-focused policy reforms such as performance-based funding, many of these groups have also maintained a focus on reducing educational equity gaps for students from underrepresented backgrounds, most notably students of color and low-income students. ETW, the California-based affiliate of the national Education Trust organization that was headed from 2017 to 2020 by former U.S. Secretary of Education John King Jr., explicitly states that it "prioritize[s] low-income communities of color in our work, including Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander students, as well as English learners." Recent ETW campaigns and publications have included "Enacting Equity: Implementing an Equity Blueprint with a Focus on Black Student Success" and "Money Matters: Prioritizing Equity and Opportunity for Students of Color in the 2023-24 California Budget" (ETW, 2023). The Campaign has also centered issues of racial equity and racial representation in its higher education work, including a recent analysis of the racial and gender makeup of California's higher education governing bodies and leadership (Campaign, 2024).

THE COMPLETION AND SUCCESS MOVEMENT IN CALIFORNIA

In the early 2000s, the collapse of the “dot-com” boom and accompanying recession dealt damage to many state budgets, none more so than California’s, which was (and remains) heavily dependent on income tax revenues from capital gains and stock sales. The California state budget went from having a \$7 billion revenue surplus in the 2000-01 fiscal year to a \$38 billion deficit in 2003-04, forcing major spending cuts in nearly all areas (Sheffrin, 2004). Cuts to public education - K-12, community college, and the state’s public four-year systems - were significant, with community colleges seeing about a \$400 million reduction in state spending from 2002-03 to 2003-04 alone (Bohn et al., 2013).

In response to higher education budget cuts, former accreditation officials brought together local community college advocates, representatives of California’s business community, and civil rights organizations to form a new research and advocacy organization, the Campaign for College Opportunity (Campaign) (Boggs 2021b). This new organization would focus not only on advocacy for greater state investments in public higher education, but on the principle that colleges and universities needed to be more efficient in spending their resources and be held accountable for their student outcomes (Campaign, 2023). Although the Campaign is far from the only philanthropy-supported advocacy organization pushing for policy changes in this space, it has played a leading or significant role in the passage of several high-profile reforms that have generated controversy and criticism from faculty organizations, as demonstrated below. For example, the Campaign either sponsored or strongly supported two of the three major initiatives cited by the 9,000-member Faculty Association for California Community Colleges (FACCC) when it voted “no confidence” in the system’s chancellor in 2019 (Gordon, 2019b).

For purposes of this discussion, three of the most significant - and controversial - reforms over which have caused division and controversy among community college advocates are: 1) The establishment of the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) pathway in 2010, a common set of lower-division and general education courses available to all community college students seeking to transfer to a campus of the California State University (CSU), regardless of which community college they attend; 2) Reforms to remedial (also known as developmental or “pre-transfer level”) coursework offered in community colleges, based on the argument that the proliferation of such courses disproportionately kept disadvantaged students, notably Black and Latinx students, from achieving their educational goals; and 3) Implementation of a new funding formula for California’s community colleges, the Student Centered Funding Formula, that partially funds colleges based on their student outcomes, including the number of students that complete a workforce certificate or transfer to a four-year university (Campaign; Lee, 2018; Metune, 2010; Ramirez, 2017). Each of these is summarized further below.

Transfer Pathways to Four-Year Universities

Preparing students for transfer to a four-year university may be one of the fundamental missions of community colleges, but the actual transfer process has long been criticized by policymakers, students, and researchers as inconsistent and confusing. The nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office in California summarized these concerns in a 2012 report:

Variation in major preparation courses and course articulation across CSU campuses has been an ongoing concern for transfer students and policymakers.... This variation complicates the transfer process by requiring multiple campus-to-campus articulation agreements, limiting students’ campus options, and increasing students’ difficulty in identifying comparable courses that will satisfy requirements at different campuses. As a result, the transfer process has not been as efficient or effective as envisioned in the Master Plan [for Higher Education, enacted in 1960] (p. 10).

In response to this fragmented and inefficient system, the Campaign sponsored Senate Bill 1440 (Padilla), the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2010, successful legislation which created a statewide transfer pathway (the Associate Degree for Transfer, or ADT). The intent of this single pathway was to create a common set of lower-division and general education courses that any student attending any community college in California could take, then receive a guarantee of transfer admission, with junior standing, to a campus of the four-year California State University (CSU) system. Except in a handful of cases, the expectation was that students with an ADT would only need to take 60 semester-equivalent units at both community college, comprising their first two years, and at the CSU, for their final two years (Baron, 2013).

Reforms to English and Math Placement

In 2017, policymakers undertook a successful effort to reform the conditions under which remedial education coursework is offered in California's community colleges. In this context, "remedial" education refers to lower-division English, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses that are considered below college-level and generally do not count for transfer credit to a four-year university (Boggs & Galizio, 2021). Prominent research on the topic indicated that students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, notably Black and Latino students, were being disproportionately placed into remedial courses upon enrolling at a community college, and that these courses had relatively low success rates (Johnson et al., 2016). In response, a coalition of advocacy organizations that included the Campaign, a faculty-led advocacy organization known as the California Acceleration Project (CAP), and others, led a successful legislative effort to strictly limit the conditions under which colleges could place students in remedial courses.

Assembly Bill 705 (Irwin) required community college leaders and faculty to demonstrate that they had provided supports such as tutoring to students to help them enroll in and pass full "transfer-level" courses in English and math within their first year of enrolling in college (Gonzales, 2017). Notably, CAP was the only faculty-led association to support this legislation; the California Teachers Association, which represents community college faculty through the Community College Association, opposed AB 705 during its consideration by the State Assembly (Warden, 2017). Five years later, four statewide faculty associations, including two additional statewide union affiliates, opposed follow-up legislation, Assembly Bill 1705 (Irwin), which further limited the conditions under which "pre-transfer level" English and math courses could be offered (Cesaretti-Monroy & Warden, 2017).

In 2018, immediately following the policy debate over remedial coursework that culminated in the passage of AB 705, many of the same nonprofit organizations helped advocate for a major policy shift in how community colleges received funding under the California state budget. Proposed by then-Governor Jerry Brown and championed by state community colleges chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley, the Student Centered Funding Formula (SCFF) revised the prior formula for funding community colleges, which was based almost entirely on enrollment - the more students were enrolled in a college, the more money that college received.

The SCFF instead created three components - a "base" grant comprising 70 percent of a college's funding, which was based solely on enrollment; a "supplemental" allocation equivalent to 20 percent of total funding, which was awarded based on the number of low-income students a college enrolled (defined, in this case, by the number of students receiving either a federal Pell Grant or a statewide waiver of tuition and fees); and a 10 percent "success" grant based on several factors including the number of students

attaining an associate's degree or workforce certificate, or who transfer to a four-year university. The intent of the SCFF was to incentivize colleges to enroll a greater percentage of low-income students, with the idea that community college often provides these students their greatest chance at upward socioeconomic mobility; and to further incentivize colleges to invest in their students' outcomes, rather than simply enrolling students and assuming they will be largely responsible for their own educational journey (Linden, 2022). In adopting a model of "performance-based funding" for some institutions of higher education, California joined about 35 states that had already done so, following a national movement that originated in the 1990s. A news story from the time of California's adoption of the SCFF cited the Campaign for College Opportunity first among 31 organizations signed on in support of the proposal (Fain, 2019b; Hillman, 2016).

A common thread throughout these reform efforts, which will be discussed later as part of the faculty-led backlash to these and similar proposals, is the push to reduce the number of courses students take, also known as *excess unit accumulation*. Advocacy organizations assert that such excess accumulation of units lengthens the time it takes students to complete their education - which costs students more money in tuition and the opportunity cost of not entering the workforce sooner (The Institute for College Access and Success, 2022). This concern was formally adopted as a statewide goal by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors as part of the *Vision for Success*, a framework enacted in 2017 that committed the system to reducing the average number of (semester-equivalent) units each community college student takes by about 10 percent, from 87 to 79, over a five-year period (CCCCO, n.d.).

Guided Pathways

The desire to reduce excess unit accumulation and decrease *time to degree* were both incorporated into Guided Pathways (GP), a relatively recent approach to designing community college academic programs, support services, advising, and outreach. This framework is perhaps best summarized by leaders of the Community College Research Center (CCRC) in their influential 2015 work *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*:

The guided pathways approach to redesign starts with students' end goals in mind, and then rethinks and redesigns programs and support services to enable students to achieve those goals.... *Instead of letting students find their own paths through college, they are creating "guided pathways" to completion of credentials, further education, and advancement in the labor market.* (Bailey et al., p.16; emphasis added)

Elements of the GP framework include things like interactive "program maps" clearly delineating the courses students should take and in which order, exploratory "meta-majors" for students who are undecided on a major but have an idea of the general area (sciences, humanities, etc.) in which they may want to study; and an accelerated approach to developmental education, as in the California example through AB 705, discussed earlier (Bailey et al., 2015). Since 2016-17, policymakers in California have allocated a total of \$200 million in state funds for community colleges to incorporate the principles of the GP model into planning, instruction, and student services statewide (CCCCO, 2019; Lee, 2021).

THE FACULTY PUSHBACK

As with any proposal involving significant change to the status quo, the policies advanced by the CSM have faced pushback, most notably by a group very close to how these reforms play out in practice, on campuses: community college faculty. Much of the faculty objections to proposals associated with the

CSM originated with a statewide effort, the Student Success Task Force (SSTF) established by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors in 2011. The Great Recession and its corresponding decline in state tax revenues had caused states to cut funding for public higher education at exactly the time when demand for degrees and certificates was surging, due to laid-off workers seeking new skills and knowledge; in California alone, an estimated 130,000 students were turned away from community colleges in the 2009-10 year (Fain, 2011). The SSTF was established as an explicit response to this misalignment, and many of its final recommendations were aligned with the CSM, including its focus on excess unit accumulation and faster pathways to a student's completion. Faculty organizations criticized the SSTF's final report, accusing it of recommending "rationing" of two-year education for the first time in California's history, of "a significant narrowing of the community college mission," and of ignoring the state's obligation to properly fund public higher education, instead accepting less funding and a more rationed system (Fain, 2012; Patton, 2011; Rein et al., 2021).

Despite these objections from faculty, the recommendations of the SSTF were adopted in regulations and legislation by 2012 (Boggs, 2021b). Four years later, one of the leaders of the Task Force and champions of its reforms, Eloy Ortiz Oakley, was made Chancellor of the California Community Colleges system. As superintendent-president of the Long Beach Community College District in 2012, Oakley had lauded the reforms called for in the Task Force, and went further by recommending the state adopt a performance-based funding model that would eventually become the Student Centered Funding Formula (Fain, 2012). As chancellor, Oakley would champion much of the completion and success movement's policy proposals, many of which were adopted into the *Vision for Success*, which was developed with consulting support and funding from the Lumina Foundation, as well as from the Gates, Irvine, and Colleges Futures Foundations - the exact "philanthro-capitalist" groups long distrusted by faculty organizations (Klein & Brill-Wynkoop, 2023). In 2019, after successful legislative efforts to reform remedial education, enact the new funding formula, and establish a controversial online-only community college, two California faculty organizations adopted a vote of "no confidence" in Oakley and the leadership of the statewide Chancellor's Office, after which Oakley continued to serve three more years as Chancellor (Gordon, 2019b).

In 2023, one of the two aforementioned faculty organizations, the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges (FACCC), presented a statewide webinar criticizing the leaders and funders of the CSM, whom they dub "Educational Philanthrocapitalists," as "Threats to Faculty, Students, and Democracy" (Klein & Brill-Wynkoop, 2023). FACCC, which has emerged as the main voice of faculty opposition in California to CSM reforms, was formed in 1953, and serves as one of five statewide associations for California community college faculty. The others include the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, with purview over academic and curricular matters, and three labor unions: the California Teachers Association, the California Federation of Teachers, and the California Community College Independents. These five groups united as the Council of Faculty Organizations (COFO) in 2001, and wield significant influence over statewide policymaking through their participation in the California Community Colleges Consultation Council, an advisory body to the state Chancellor's Office and Board of Governors; and through their advocacy through the legislative process and state and federal elections (Morse, 2021).

Much of the faculty-driven criticism of the CSM and its policy goals stems from the movement's association with philanthropic foundations funded by large corporations and wealthy individuals. Faculty associated with the City College of San Francisco and its legal battles with a controversial accrediting agency in the early 2010s have compared the CSM to the charter school movement, claiming that

The privatization agenda in K-12 showed in the move to divert money to privately owned charter schools, educational technology, and testing companies. In the community colleges, privatization involves: downsizing public community colleges, which gives for-profit colleges new room to grow; more outsourcing to private contractors; promoting full-time attendance.... The push for students to take a full-time fifteen-unit load would drive them straight into the debt trap set by the student loan industry. (Rein et al, 2021, p.97)

FACCC has made similar arguments, pointing out that the Lumina Foundation has received major funding from Sallie Mae, which has served as both a student loan servicer and collector and now provides private student loans of its own, and thus, has a financial interest in policies that will allegedly force more students to take out loan debt (Klein & Brill-Wynkoop, 2023). Other faculty advocates have stressed their objections to the broad philosophical rationale behind CSM measures such as a focus on student outcomes. Robin G. Isserles has criticized the “outcomes” discussion as being too narrowly focused on the student’s end goal (a degree or certificate) rather than the journey it took to get there: “We concentrate an enormous amount of effort and energy to get community college students through college but spend very little time and energy looking at *how*: how they grow intellectually and socially, as well as how they improve academically and developmentally” (2021, p. 55).

Other critics of wealthy philanthropic foundations and their involvement in education policy have hypothesized that the intent of the educational reform movement is to strip away apparently superfluous elements of the educational experience such as personal growth, exploring different subjects, and developing critical thinking skills. As journalist Tim Schwab writes in his book-length criticism of Bill Gates and his philanthropic efforts,

Gates has given his own children the same rich educational experiences he had, but he has been far less charitable toward the poor children of color at the heart of his philanthropic efforts. For the masses and the commoners, education is not about enlightenment or critical thinking or creativity or dignity or self-discovery or even learning. *It's about getting the necessary training to be useful contributors to the global economy.* (2023, p. 206; emphasis added)

For the immediate future, it seems certain that faculty advocates and CSM proponents will continue to do battle in legislative and policy arenas, in California and other states. In 2023 alone, several bills championed by forces on both sides have advanced through the California Legislature. CSM advocates, led by the Education Trust West, have opposed legislation sponsored by a statewide faculty union that would expand the number of times students can attempt to pass a course that they previously failed; the CSM argument is that simply giving students more chances to pass a course reduces incentives for colleges to invest in supports such as tutoring that could help a student pass a course on their first attempt (Ramirez, 2023). Faculty groups, including the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, have expressed concern about legislation (sponsored by the Campaign) that would expand the ADT pathway to include students seeking to transfer to the University of California, arguing that it would create unintended consequences for community college students (Aschenbach, 2023). Are these two “sides” of this growing higher education debate destined to reflexively oppose one another on every major issue facing today’s college students?

BASIC NEEDS AND FINANCIAL AID: AREAS OF AGREEMENT

Despite the fact that they have vehemently disagreed with one another on high-profile policies, faculty associations and the CSM have, at least in California, united behind statewide advocacy for some recent efforts to expand direct aid and supports to students – including a proposed expansion of student financial aid, ongoing funding for services that address students' basic needs, and efforts to guarantee undocumented students equitable access to higher education. Several of the most prominent nonprofit organizations part of the CSM have supported or co-sponsored a major statewide advocacy effort, led by student advocacy associations, to significantly expand eligibility requirements for the state Cal Grant program; FACCC and the California Federation of Teachers both supported this effort (Ramirez, 2022). In a similar vein, FACCC has consistently sponsored or supported legislation to expand access to social services programs, such as food assistance, that address students' basic needs, and this legislation has generally garnered support from CSM organizations (Cesaretti-Monroy, 2021; Mathis, 2021).

Both CSM advocates and faculty organizations have increasingly prioritized efforts to reduce systemic inequities for students in historically disadvantaged groups. CSM groups like the Campaign and ETW, as well as faculty associations including FACCC and the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, have supported the community colleges' annual Undocumented Student Action Week, which advocates for state and federal policy change to ensure that undocumented students can equitably pursue a higher education (CCCCO, 2022; L. Vazquez, personal communication, August 27, 2023).

CONCLUSION

While there are areas of agreement between the CSM and faculty-aligned critics, there are significant policy implications not heretofore addressed in this paper (and indeed, rarely addressed by policymakers when considering state legislation concerning the community colleges) that could complicate further such efforts. First, California's community colleges have been required since 1961 to expend no less than 50 percent of their educational expenses on salary and benefits of instructional faculty, a statutory restriction commonly known as the "Fifty Percent Law" (Rodriguez, 2023). Representatives of college administrators and district leadership have long framed the Fifty Percent Law as a hindrance on their operating flexibility, and an impediment to their ability to adequately budget for student services (Community College League of California, 2023). Much of the funding that would provide additional resources to community colleges to meet the policy reforms discussed herein would put colleges at danger of falling out of compliance with the Fifty Percent Law – though, notably, the expansion of student financial aid eligibility would not, since those funds are paid directly to students in the form of grants.

In addition to the restrictions of the Fifty Percent Law, California's community colleges are under pressure from policymakers to increase their hiring of full-time, tenure-track faculty. State law, since 1988, has required the system to work towards a goal of having 75 percent of instructional hours taught by faculty who are classified as full-time, based on an assumption that full-time faculty are more connected to their campus and their community, have higher rates of job satisfaction and morale due to their more robust salary and benefits structure, and have more time to devote to working with students (Galizio et al, 2021). However, a 2023 state audit reported that the system as a whole had never come within 10 percentage points of the so-called "75 percent goal," averaging between 55 and 65 percent from 2003 to 2021 (California State Auditor, 2023).

Combined, the twin pressures of having to meet the Fifty Percent Law, requiring that at least 50 percent of all expenses go toward faculty salary and benefits, and the 75 percent goal of ensuring that at least 75 percent of instruction is provided by full-time faculty, could create significant complications for many

of the policy goals discussed in this paper. Faculty groups could see the intensive student services, such as counseling and tutoring, or on-campus support for basic needs, as competing with funding for additional faculty hiring, given the landscape of scarce budget resources. CSM groups could see the same and urge colleges to prioritize direct supports to students over faculty hiring. Regardless of the stances these two sides of the debate take on individual proposals, policymakers will have to weigh carefully their choices in the coming years, in the context of constraints on community college spending.

Clearly, California's CSM advocates and faculty associations do not disagree on every policy issue; and there are a few high-profile areas where they are strongly aligned. The work of expanding access to financial aid is not done; the 2022 expansion of the state Cal Grant program will only go into effect if the state is able to identify sufficient funding in the 2024-25 fiscal year budget – which seems unlikely, given the state of the economy and revenue forecasts as of this writing (LAO, 2023). The successful advocacy of the powerful faculty associations, with their tens of thousands of dues-paying members (who are also voters), as well as the influential CSM advocacy groups, backed by significant philanthropic funding, may well be critical to successful efforts to ensure that all students can afford a college education, and that they are not held back by high living costs or crises of basic needs, such as food insecurity. In theory, the faculty and the “philanthro-capitalists” may be able to accomplish major policy gains if they are united, rather than permanently divided.

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