

**Select Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education in California**

**March 1<sup>st</sup> 2018: Student Hearing**

**Panel: Ensuring Equity and Student Success**

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When I first decided to return to school after my year-and-a-half break, I would not have imagined, four years later, that I would still be in this system. I never would have imagined myself having to drop out of several classes simply due to workload and conflicting work schedules, sometimes balancing two to three, part time jobs at a time. I never would have imagined myself having to sit in on 3 different Communication 60 courses the first week of school this semester, attempting to get enrolled in one after it was cancelled on me three separate times. Additionally, I most certainly would not have imagined myself here today with you all, at Fresno City College, speaking on behalf of my fellow peers about issues relating to equity and student academic success.

The time of “junior” colleges being two-year systems is long gone. The latest information out of the Chancellor’s Office shows that only about 6-7% of students receive a degree or successfully transfer after 2 years. In fact, the practice of students taking longer to reach their various success goal is (plurality agreement) so embedded into our system’s culture that most of our data tracks students in 6-year cohorts! Being from a Latin-American background, I sometimes feel myself caught between two worlds. In my Hispanic culture, we value education at any level, but for many reasons, a lot of people do not complete or even attempt any type of higher education or *la Universidad*. My mother and father never had the opportunity to attend a high school before immigrating to the US and immediately joining the workforce. Whenever my family from Mexico comes to visit, they are always asking me how school is going, and for the most part, are ecstatic that I’m spending any time on furthering my education. We also value working and I don’t think the thought has ever occurred to my family that I would not be able to work while attending school. On the contrary, friends from different upbringing often question me about my choices to take time away from school and the “*what ifs*” of me deciding to attend a university straight out of high school. They offer suggestions like “maybe you should stop working as much or even all together?” or “don’t take any breaks anymore and just push through!” As much as I’d like to say I have my 10 or even my 5-year plan all figured out, the reality is that I don’t. Neither of my conflicting advisors is wrong, on the other hand, I think they are both right in their own way. Yes, I should always be focusing on my education if I truly wish to be successful and yes, maybe I am spending too much time working, but there has to be some balance, right? A balance where I should still be able fulfill my cultural responsibilities of attending school and working, while being able to complete my goal in two, maybe three years at most!

What's holding students back? Is it remediation or "basic skills" that set students up immediately in a position where they have no other option but to finish a sequence of course that can easily take 2 years just to reach transfer level? Is it course offerings and class scheduling that are unpredictable and sometimes offer zero suggestions on how to move forward from that point on? Is it a lack of financial aid resources to support attending a college that requires a \$150 textbook that my professors wrote so I have no other option but to buy it new at the bookstore? Is it the cultural piece that sometimes isn't translated correctly when speaking to a counselor who may not look like me about what our future plans are and expected family values? Is it even more widespread that students have such minimal resources that they are suffering from food insecurity & unstable living conditions, affecting their performance?

The answer to improving equity and academic success across our campuses isn't as simple as fixing a specific issue or placing reactive Band-Aid proposals. Just in remedial education alone, from a report that was provided by the Legislative Analyst's Office in March, 3 quarters of first time CCC students are determined as unprepared, more than 40% at the CSU and 23% of first-time UC Students. From the onset, we are alone in maneuvering through an almost archaic website to fill out confusing application questions. We wait in lines for impossible times only to be told we have to come back in two weeks to meet with a counselor with a 1:700 student ratio. Hope that our financial aid, if awarded, is disbursed early enough to have our books by the second week of class all while managing to balance a successful work, social, and family life. Institutions will be the first to tell you that they are doing everything they can to improve the academic success of their students, that some students are just "unprepared", but even if the tools are there, we need to do better to show students what those tools are and where to find them.

- There have been conversations around the idea of moving toward a 15-unit semester or 30-unit year threshold to maintain full-time status or incentivizing additional grant funds. I would argue that the students who cannot maintain fulltime status now will only be displaced even further. We often talk about how our system doesn't cater to working adults by not offering many evenings or weekend classes, having offices and core services opened past 5 pm on weekdays, or limiting types of financial aid to certain age groups. The resources allocated for this new fulltime status wouldn't be going to those who actually need it, it would be going to those students who would normally be able to complete the additional units. These students are sometimes the most affluent in our system, not having as many responsibilities to work or children at home. Our community colleges were meant for those with not as many opportunities to utilize for their own social mobility, not to give others an unfair advantage for already having the means to be successful.
- Another suggestion I would make is to provide an additional focus on course scheduling and class offerings! There are some colleges in our system using the Quarter system, and even a few who follow an 18-week calendar. Aside from overall calendars, some colleges could do more when planning out their class offerings. Again, there aren't enough

evening or weekend classes, but beyond that, how are we supposed to successfully complete in 2 years when we don't know even know what classes are going to be offered just a semester from now? When you all have a chance, I encourage you all to look at your local college's website and find the schedule of classes. Most of them won't even have their Summer 2018 courses that are being offered let alone their Fall 2018. This is something that we're hoping will be addressed in discussions around Guided Pathways, but I'm trying to understand how we've gone this long expecting students to complete a two year and rush them through the various services only to be met with the impossible task of planning their schedule a year or even a semester ahead! We must be innovative in our culture around scheduling if we truly wish to meet all student's needs.

- If we're hoping to have a meaningful conversation about remediation, we also need to be open to the idea that our classroom expectations might not be on par with the reality of students' academic levels. The conversations around relying on placement tests to assess student's levels is also changing. Multiple measures have come to the forefront of deciding where we believe a student is ready and will be most successful. Things like high school GPA, previous workload, or even a 30-minute counselor visit can have an enormous effect on whether I have to take two semesters of math before reaching transfer level, keeping me from being enrolled in other required classes. But what if our idea of placement isn't entirely accurate? An assessment test can be seen as a way to set cut-scores for students expected achievement levels, but it can also be used as a tool to assist faculty with providing an adaptive course. Faculty can finally learn from data around the students who test into a course and maybe adapt their courses to a more realistic level for student success – this information cannot be made available using high school transcript data, especially for those who don't self-report. An assessment tool might not be the answer to our questions surrounding placement and remediation, but it can be argued that we need more comparable data to go about creating and adjusting reflective courses instead of using some metrics that may negatively impact our students.
- If we're going to rely on multiple measures and transcript information through AB 705, we must also form an even greater data-sharing relationship with our K-12 partners. Self-reported data can only get us so far, and with no way of verifying that information without some validation procedures, there will be some inaccurate placements along the way. Although these partnerships may only benefit the population that plans to attend a college after high school, we must be providing continuous and accurate data throughout our system.