

Digital Foreigners in Charge

Inside Higher Ed

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By Carl Straumsheim

Board members are spending more of their time debating issues such as competency-based learning, online courses and technology in the classroom, but many of them feel unprepared to make strategic decisions about the role of technology in their institutions.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges surveyed more than 2,000 board members this spring, finding that 57.6 percent of respondents felt they spent more time discussing how educational technology would impact their institutions than the year before. As the conversation about technology on campus intensifies, only 19 percent of respondents said their boards are prepared to decide which technologies to invest in. Half of respondents rated their boards as showing “generally good engagement; some lack of awareness or understanding,” and an additional 20 percent said their boards exhibited “poor execution of this area of oversight.”

The sense of unpreparedness may stem from the lack of information board members receive about the various technological initiatives taking place on their own campuses. In every category, from what competitors are doing with online learning to the cost of online education, between one-half and two-thirds of respondents said they received “fair,” “poor” or no information. Instead, board members learn about online education from other higher education professionals (74 percent), presentations at board meetings (67 percent) or higher education publications (66 percent).

The results suggest board members may not be as up to date on technological innovations as they feel they should be, but that they also have time to catch up. Only 28 percent of respondents say online education is “important” or “essential” to their institutions today, but when asked to look ahead five years, 71 percent of respondents say they expect it will be so. At the same time, the group of respondents answering “not important” drops from 30.9 percent to 3.2 percent, suggesting a general agreement among board members that while online education will eventually play some role, its significance may vary.

Massive open online courses continue to be a topic on which board members have a range of views: 57 percent of respondents said they think MOOCs may have a positive impact on their institution in the future, but 56 percent also agreed that MOOCs could pose a threat to their business models. In comparison, board members were more positive toward the use of prior learning assessments and competency-based credits, with 62 and 60 percent, respectively, saying those initiatives could have a positive impact. As respondents identified greater scheduling flexibility and reaching different students as the top priorities of online education, the numbers suggest board members are most positive

toward initiatives that appeal to nontraditional students whose obligations prevent them from pursuing higher education.

With the perceived growth of online education in the next five years, many board members are questioning their institutions' rate of change. A single percent of respondents said their institutions are moving too fast to offer online education, while 35 percent of respondents are concerned they are moving too slowly. Yet a plurality, or 43 percent, rated their institution's approach as "just right."

The tendency among board members to think universities are too slow to launch new technological initiatives can be seen at institutions such as the University of Virginia, where disagreements about the role of online education last year led to the brief ouster of President Teresa Sullivan. E-mail conversations between members of the Board of Visitors in the weeks before Sullivan's departure showed board members sharing articles that discussed the potential of massive open online courses to lower the cost of higher education. The board reversed the decision two weeks later.

About 90 percent of the institutions surveyed offer at least one four-year degree. About eight percent identified as for-profit institutions, while 58.9 percent enrolled between 1,000 and 5,000 students.

Proposal would let California's 2-year colleges grant 4-year degrees

carla.rivera@latimes.com

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California's community college system is considering a controversial effort to offer four-year degrees, a move designed to boost the number of students who graduate and are more prepared for the workforce.

The change would require legislation authorizing junior colleges to grant baccalaureate degrees. Colleges would also need to seek additional accreditation as baccalaureate-granting institutions. Supporters argue that it would help to address shortages in workforce training and benefit students in rural areas without access to a four-year university.

But critics, including some community college faculty and officials from four-year universities, counter that it would represent a dramatic shift from the traditional mission of the two-year system. They point to the state's 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, which designated community colleges as open-for-all campuses for career and transfer students. The four-year universities were to focus on research and higher degrees.

A 16-member panel, appointed by community colleges Chancellor Brice Harris, is weighing the move. The group includes administrators, faculty, a student, a college trustee and representatives from the University of California and California State University systems.

If adopted, California would follow a growing trend: As many as 21 states have approved baccalaureate programs at community colleges, most recently Michigan, which in December granted junior colleges authority to offer four-year degrees in a limited number of fields such as maritime technology and culinary arts.

But most of the efforts have met fierce political resistance from universities and private colleges concerned about competition for students as well as duplication of programs. The battle in California, with 112 community colleges and 2.4 million students, is likely to be just as intense.

A 2005 state law authorized partnerships between two- and four-year schools to offer baccalaureate degrees on community college campuses. College of the Canyons, for example, partners with Cal State campuses in Los Angeles, Bakersfield and Northridge, as well as private institutions such as the University of La Verne and Brandman University that offer bachelor's degrees in liberal arts, engineering and other majors on its Santa Clarita campus.

But legislative attempts to establish stand-alone bachelor's programs have failed.

"The intent ... is to look at the issue from all sides," said Barry Russell, the community colleges' vice chancellor for academic affairs. "We have people in the group who think it's a peachy keen idea and we should start doing it next week. But also people who are wary and looking at the implications of changing the mission of community colleges."

The panel is scheduled to present a report to Harris and the Board of Governors by year's end.

Major questions include the costs of baccalaureate programs and how high fees would be set. Colleges would also probably need to increase faculty with the credentials, such as a doctorate degree, needed to teach upper division course work as well as upgrade libraries and laboratories.

Many wonder how a system forced by budget cuts to slash classes and turn away more than 500,000 traditional students would handle the increased demands imposed by baccalaureate programs.

Faculty, too, want more of those questions answered, said Beth Smith, president of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges.

"We want to continue to address our original mission as well as we can before we tackle new ways to serve students," said Smith, a math professor at Grossmont College in El Cajon. "It doesn't mean there aren't important reasons to investigate this topic. It's a challenge for us because the situation of our students has changed, particularly in the case of career technical programs and nursing, where an associate's degree used to lead to employment, and that's no longer the case."

Cal State and UC officials said maintaining their respective roles is the best way to serve students.

"Cal State, UC and community colleges work together on a regular basis and we'd like to continue that," said Christine Mallon, assistant vice chancellor for academic programs and faculty development at Cal State and a member of the panel. "We should continue making use of the infrastructure, faculty and resources and continue finishing degrees started in community colleges."

Education experts said it's a tricky balance but that community college bachelor's programs can help fill needs specific to local communities such as nursing, automotive and biotechnology.

"Provided they are offering bachelor's degrees that other public institutions aren't offering, particularly in applied technical areas," said Davis Jenkins, senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at [Columbia University's Teachers College](#).

"In general it doesn't depart from the community college mission because they were designed to meet community needs."

State Sen. Marty Block (D-San Diego) noted that Cal State lobbied and won legislative approval to offer doctoral degrees in education, physical therapy and nursing, despite arguments from UC and others against "mission creep."

Block proposed a pilot program in 2011 authorizing the Grossmont-Cuyamaca and San Mateo County community districts to offer selective bachelor's degrees where workforce needs are high. Students would pay regular community college fees for the first two years and a to-be-determined higher fee for the upper division courses. He pulled that proposal because of budget concerns.

"Times have changed and we have a small surplus," Block said. "As the education budget chair in the Senate, I think I can find pools of funding. The need has grown so great that private sector employers now have said they may be willing to offer money for start-up. It gives me hopes that a similar bill this time would be successful."

Such legislation would be a boost to San Diego City College nursing students, said Debbie Berg, associate dean and director of nursing programs. Most of the 63 students who graduated as registered nurses in May want to pursue a bachelor's degree, she said.

The closest institution, San Diego State, enrolled 42 registered nurses in its bachelor's degree program this fall, with 14 from City College, Berg said. Students are trying to enroll in other Cal State campuses, but most have too few spaces, she said. Meanwhile, tuition to complete a nursing degree at private colleges can run \$50,000 to \$90,000.

Jonathan Bills was one of the lucky 14 who got a spot at San Diego State. After graduating in May, he encountered the problem faced by many of his classmates: An associate's degree isn't enough for a profession that increasingly demands a bachelor's.

"If I had a choice," he said, "it would be no other decision than to stay and get the bachelor's" at San Diego City College.

Great California Earthquake Drill at El Camino College in pictures

Daily Breeze By From staff reports

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At El

Camino College, a student in the library continues to study as she takes cover under a desk during the Great California Shake Out, held Thursday morning throughout the state. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

At El Camino College Thursday, students were evacuated from classes after taking shelter under their desks during the Great California Shake Out. The earthquake drill was held Thursday morning throughout the state.



At El Camino College, students wait during the evacuation for the drill called the Great California Shake Out, held Thursday morning throughout the state. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

Associate's degrees pay off big for state, students, study says

EdSource

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By Kathryn Baron

California gets the best return on its investment in community colleges compared to any other state, and community college students don't do so badly either, according to a recent study.

Across the country, however, the study finds huge disparities in whether states even recoup the money they spend on community colleges. That has critics cautioning that flaws in the research methodology tainted the results.

The report, What's the Value of an Associate's Degree?, released earlier this month by research groups The American Institutes for Research and Nexus Research and Policy Center, found that California receives an average rate of return of \$86,257 for every student who earns an associate's degree and doesn't go on for a higher degree over the course of his or her career. The median return on investment among all states is \$42,600. The study's authors computed what they call the "return on investment" by calculating how much each state spends on its public community colleges compared with the additional tax revenues they expect to receive from higher future earnings of graduates with associate's degrees versus high school diplomas.

Individually, California community college graduates take home an average of \$352,011 more over a 40-year career than someone with just a high school diploma. Only graduates in Nevada and Tennessee do better. (In California, the two year degree is referred to as an associate degree rather than an associate's degree.)

Nationwide, the median additional lifetime earnings are \$259,000, the report said.

"Even after factoring in the costs that graduates incur when earning the degree, the associate's degree is a good investment," wrote authors Jorge Klor de Alva, president of Nexus Research, and Mark Schneider, a vice president at AIR.

The costs to students include tuition, books, fees and the loss of earnings from not working during the two, three or four years they were attending community college.

Best estimate or misleading?

The researchers studied 579 community colleges across the country – about 60 percent of all the schools nationwide – and, from those, compiled data for more than 80 percent of the colleges' full-time equivalent students.

To figure out each state's return on its investment, the authors used a complicated calculation that "not very many have tried," Schneider said. First, they had to figure out

how much money taxpayers put into subsidizing a community college education based on state budget allocations, subsidized student loans, grants and the tax-exempt status of schools.

On the students' income end, they took the overall tax rate in each state, combining personal income and sales taxes, and applied that to the difference in income for someone with an associate's degree versus a high school diploma.

Across the country the results are astonishingly broad. At the high end, graduates in Nevada earn nearly \$412,000 more than the state's high school graduates during their work life, while Missouri's students earn \$84,000 less during their careers than they would have if they stopped their education after high school. The state of Missouri itself also doesn't recover what it pays into community colleges, losing a little more than \$12,000 per student, the report said.

"The findings completely defy logic," countered Zora Mulligan, executive director of the Missouri Community College Association, a non-governmental organization that all the state's community colleges belong to. She said the report overstates the costs and understates the benefits, especially because it only looks at benefits from a small segment of graduates who earn associate's degrees. As is the case in most states, Missouri's community colleges have four tracks of students, Mulligan said – those earning a targeted and industry-specific credential, students earning an associate's degree, students planning to transfer to a four-year college, and professionals seeking additional training, often through contracts with local industry.

Schneider acknowledges that the study's methodology has touched off debate because it's based on estimates of tax revenue and wages extrapolated over four decades. "How well we did it is a subject of dispute," he said.

Missouri's own economic analysis found that although people with associate's degrees earn an average of \$11,000 more per year than if they just had a high school diploma, anyone with some higher education sees an incremental increase in their earning power, said Mulligan. In addition, the researchers in the AIR report didn't account for regional differences. Community college graduates in St. Louis earn about twice as much as students attending rural community colleges, she said.

"The research is so flawed that any conclusions based on the research are also flawed," Mulligan said.

The American Association of Community Colleges, AACC, also criticized the research, calling it "damaging and misleading" and "contradicted by many other studies."

In a response to the AIR/Nexus report on its [website](#), the AACC concurs with Missouri that the "fundamental shortcoming" is that the study doesn't include community college students who earn certificates or those who transfer to a four-year college and earn a

baccalaureate degree, and it excludes students who take more than three years to complete the associate's degrees.

Community college students increasingly seek certificates because some of the programs are shorter – they range from six units, or two classes, up to 60 units, the same length as an associate's degree – and they can get into the workforce sooner, and they're usually tailored to jobs that are in high demand in the local community. Over the past two decades, the number of certificates awarded by community colleges nationwide has increased from 124,500 to 425,000 a year, according to the AACC. In California, the community college chancellor's office reports that 65,000 students earned certificates in 2011-12, while 90,000 earned associate's degrees.

“Without these data, it is not possible to meaningfully portray either the value added by community college programs or the public's return on investment,” the AACC wrote.

Data still valuable

Even the AACC admits that the study did provide some important insights and raise questions that need to be pursued. In general, the researchers found that the more money states put into a community college education and the lower the faculty-to-student ratio, the more graduates tend to earn.

The report also gives states very specific information on what happens to graduates at each college because in addition to providing data for each state, it breaks down earnings by campus.

College	Average lifetime earnings of graduates	Average lifetime return to California
Foothill College	\$745,000	\$161,567
Ohlone College	\$740,292	\$162,476
Golden West College	\$711,812	\$154,356
Evergreen Valley College	\$705,787	\$153,626
Chabot College	\$670,751	\$148,366

Top five California community colleges whose graduates with associate's degrees provide the highest rate of return after 40 years in the workforce. Source: American Institutes for Research and Nexus Research

Of California's 112 community colleges, 44 are in the “top tier” in terms of giving graduates the highest financial return, according to the study. Foothill College, in Silicon Valley, leads the pack, with its students earning \$745,334 more during their careers than high school graduates. Three other colleges are in the \$700,000 and above club: Ohlone Community College in Fremont, Golden West College in Huntington Beach and Evergreen Valley College in San Jose.

Having this level of information allows all the colleges to look at what's going on in the places that do well.

Judy Miner, president of Foothill College, cited a number of factors for her school's success, one being strong community support, including direct financial support and providing internships for students.

She also credits the college's solid liberal arts education for giving students the foundation they need to be successful in four-year colleges. Students from Foothill and other top-performing community colleges who transfer to the University of California and California State University do as well or better in class than students who started as freshmen, and graduate at about the same rate, according to the Community College League of California.

Successful schools also have a student-centered focus, Miner and others said. When community colleges lost almost a billion dollars during the recession, Foothill opted not to make across-the-board cuts, but to put their money into preserving their best programs, Miner said.

Golden West College took seven of its most popular degrees, grouped students into cohorts of 300 and developed a sequence of courses guaranteeing that those students will get the classes they need and be able to graduate or transfer within three years.

"We're moving our focus from offering courses that seem to fill, to offering courses that are actually on the pathway to completion," said Omid Pourzanjani, Golden West's vice president for instruction.

Location matters

Sometimes success is a matter of location, the report notes.

Graduates of five California community colleges have lower median earnings than high school graduates in their regions. Oxnard College in Ventura County is the lowest. Students graduating with an associate's degree earn \$90,000 less during their careers than local high school graduates. The other four at the bottom of the scale are Mendocino College, Reedley College, Los Angeles Mission and Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo.

"The programmatic mix and the local economy are probably the biggest factors" in how well graduates do, said California Community College Vice Chancellor Patrick Perry. A college with a lot of high-tech and health majors will have higher-paid graduates than one that offers a large number of early childhood education classes, a career where salaries tend to be lower.

Although California came out well in the study, Perry is still a bit skeptical of the results. He said the Salary Surfer, an interactive tool developed by his office earlier this year, provides a more accurate picture of which majors generate the highest income because

the wage figures come directly from the state Employment Development Department and are based on five years of data.

The AIR/Nexus researchers offer four recommendations to boost the rate of return both for states and students. Two are common sense: emphasizing degrees with occupational and technical skills that are in demand and have better pay, and making better use of data to understand which colleges are doing well, which aren't and how to help the latter.

The third recommendation, to increase funding and reduce the faculty-to-student ratio, is unlikely to happen until the state's finances improve. The fourth calls for funding community colleges "based not only on enrollment but also on specific performance benchmarks of student success."

This pay-for-performance idea was one of the draft recommendations in the state's community college Student Success Task Force report two years ago. It was overwhelmingly opposed and is no longer on the table.

Paige Marlatt Dorr, director of communications for the chancellor's office, put it succinctly: "It's not something that our system is currently looking at or approaching."

Faster Math Path

Inside Higher Ed

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By Paul Fain

A faculty-led group called the California Acceleration Project has helped 42 of the state's community colleges offer redesigned, faster versions of remedial math and English tracks. But the group's co-founders said they would be able to make much more progress if the University of California changed its transfer credit requirements.

Remedial courses are widely seen as one of the biggest stumbling blocks to improving college graduation rates, as few students who place into remediation ever earn a degree.

The problem is particularly severe for black and Hispanic students, who account for almost half of the California community college system's total enrollment of 2.4 million.

More than 50 percent of black and Hispanic community college students place three or more levels below college mathematics, said Myra Snell, a math professor at Los Medanos College. And only 6 percent of those remedial students will complete a credit-bearing math course within three years of starting the first remedial course.

A key reason for abysmal pass rates is the length of remedial sequences, argue Snell and Katie Hern, an English instructor at Chabot College, which, like Los Medanos, is a two-year institution located in California.

"The lower down you start, the fewer students complete," Hern said.

The two instructors decided to do something about the problem. In 2010 they founded the California Acceleration Project. Armed with research from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, they encouraged their peers to offer shorter remedial sequences in math and English.

In 2009 Snell created an accelerated algebra course she calls "Path2Stats." The course seeks to prepare students for statistics. It includes some intermediate algebra, but left out the parts she and others deem nonessential for students to succeed in college-level statistics. Some experts think statistics, instead of algebra, is sufficient for students who are not majoring in science, engineering or mathematics.

Instead of a three- to four-semester remedial pipeline, Path2Stats is a single, 6-unit course that students can complete to move directly to the transfer-level, credit-bearing statistics.

Its results have been impressive (see graphic). Students who enrolled in it were more than four times as likely to complete college-level math as their peers in traditional remedial sequences.

**Los Medanos College
Completion of Transferable Math Requirement**

<u>Student placement in traditional math sequence</u>	<u>Traditional Path</u> % of students who successfully complete any college-level math course (in three years)	<u>Path2Stats</u> % of students from pre-stats course who successfully complete statistics (in one year)
Transfer-level		100% (3 of 3)
Intermediate Algebra	33% (215 of 651)	82% (18 of 22)
Elementary Algebra	17% (102 of 598)	78% (25 of 32)
Pre-algebra or Arithmetic	9% (45 of 507)	38% (21 of 55)
Unknown placement		57% (4 of 7)
Overall Completion Rate	21% (362 of 1756)	60% (71 of 119)

Snell’s course became a model for instructors at other community colleges. Currently 21 of the colleges now offer pilot versions of courses that draw from her work. (A total of 42 California community colleges offer accelerated math or English courses.)

She also ran into resistance, however, mostly because of the transfer-credit prerequisites set by the UC System.

Pamela Burdman described the controversy in a report that LearningWorks, a California-based nonprofit group, released last week. Burdman, a Berkeley-based consultant, noted that the course was tripped up by UC requirements for transfer students, which say that college-level math courses must include intermediate algebra or its equivalent as a prerequisite.

California State University has similar transfer policies. But experts said Cal State's campuses are more flexible than UC’s on the intermediate algebra question.

Los Medanos listed Path2Stats as an alternative requirement. That worked fine until 2012, Burdman reported, when a UC official told the college that approval of the course for transfer purposes had been removed.

As a partial result of transfer worries, Los Medanos has been cautious about the number of sections of Snell’s course that it offers. And last year college officials tried to cut the course entirely. But students protested, and they brought it back.

Los Medanos now has three or four sections of Path2Stats each semester, said Snell, compared to 12 sections of intermediate algebra.

“Change is slow,” she said. “And politics with three faculty in three different systems is difficult.”

Beth Smith is a professor of mathematics at Grossmont College and president of the statewide Academic Senate for community colleges. She said the senate has not taken a position on UC’s view of Path2Stats.

Faculty members have a wide range of takes on accelerated math remediation, she said. Some love it while others worry about dropping intermediate algebra.

“The universities are trusting us to teach the students and prepare the students,” Smith said.

Encouraging Experimentation

Relatively few California community college students transfer to UC, with the bulk going to Cal State. But the UC current transfer policies have still had a “chilling effect” on experimentation with remedial courses at the two-year level, said Hern.

“It makes it harder for us to encourage colleges to move forward,” she said.

The two faculty members said community college officials often call the California Acceleration Project to ask if the policies have changed. They tend to hold off on trying accelerated courses when told no.

Without the transfer policy, Hern predicted that all 112 of the state’s community colleges would offer accelerated remedial courses.

Even so, Path2Stats is still going strong. And the course and others like it can still work for transfer-bound students, thanks to a bit of a back-door approach. State policies allow students to “challenge” college-level course prerequisites if they succeed in credit-bearing math without taking intermediate algebra.

“We’ve been using that part of the education code to create a space for innovation,” Hern said. “Otherwise there would be no way to experiment.”

Related approaches to accelerated remediation are also taking off in California.

The Carnegie Foundation’s alternate sequences, dubbed Statway and Quantway, are being tried in California as well as 10 other states, according to Burdman’s report. And in Texas, all two-year institutions are working on a remedial math redesign, called the New Mathways Project, which draws heavily from Carnegie’s work.

Cal State has bestowed Statway with transfer-prerequisite status, according to officials in the state. UC does not, however.

Complete College America is a nonprofit group that is pushing changes to remedial education around the country, including some controversial state policies. The group supports the California Acceleration Project and Statway, said Bruce Vandal, its vice president. He said both are showing tremendous results in getting students to pass gateway statistics courses.

“We encourage the University of California to reconsider its decision on Path2Stats,” Vandal said via e-mail, and to “join the growing movement across the nation to redesign math pathways to ensure greater success in gateway math course and improved college completion.”

Vandal pointed to the University of Georgia, Georgia Institute of Technology, Purdue University and Indiana University, all of which now allow statistics or quantitative reasoning to serve as gateway courses that fulfill math requirements.

Barbara Illowsky, a math professor at De Anza College who oversees the California community college system’s basic skills initiative, said she applauds experimentation with alternative remedial pathways by the state’s two-year colleges.

“More and more faculty are realizing that statistics is a more useful terminal course than college algebra,” she said, “for many, many majors and many students.”

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/10/21/california-community-colleges-cautious-experiment-accelerated-remediation#ixzz2iZp1YISr>
Inside Higher Ed

Long Beach City College raises tuition, two-tier system creative solution: Editorial

Daily Breeze

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This week, the Long Beach City College Board of Trustees unanimously approved a plan to add a batch of English, sociology and other classes with long waiting lists to winter and summer sessions — but that cost more than the regular course offerings.

It's not an ideal situation, but it shows creativity often lacking in public higher education. And, in the face of budgetary problems, it may be the best — or only — way to address the needs of hundreds of students who might otherwise have to delay their graduation or transfer for months or, worse, years.

There are more than 5,000 LBCC students who can't register for classes needed to graduate or move to a four-year university. That's because the number of courses offered during the spring and fall semesters has been falling over the years, a victim of California's budget woes.

A recent study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that statewide there were nearly half a million community college students on course waiting lists in 2012.

Until now those students had few options but to wait until the next semester or later to take their desired class. But a law by Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Santa Barbra, passed earlier this year allows six community colleges, including LBCC, to increase their offerings of high-demand classes during shorter winter and summer sessions.

These courses are more expensive, but they pay for themselves and don't dip into precious state funding of other courses. So, this eases the burden on existing courses by offering their equivalent at a premium. It does not interfere or change the amount or type of courses being offered during the regular spring or fall session. Instead, it adds more classes to the year overall.

That means more than just reducing the long lines of college kids snaking out the classroom door on the first day of school. If successful, it will mean getting through the community college system faster and creating less stress for students and teachers.

Long Beach is the first community college to launch this pilot program. It's estimated 50 extra classes will be added to LBCC's first-time winter session in 2014. The price tag is \$225 a unit or about \$675 for a three-unit class. That's not cheap, and far above the current \$46 a unit.

Opponents rightly argue community colleges should be a bastion for all of California, regardless of income.

But the wealth gap has been addressed. Students eligible for financial aid will be able to enroll in these courses at a reduced costs, \$70 a unit.

Moreover, it will help veterans on the GI Bill. In order for veterans to take advantage of tuition reimbursement and housing subsidies year-round, the courses they need must be offered in summer and winter.

Fears that this opens up the door to creating a “two-tier” educational system — one for those who can pay and another for those who can’t — are over-hyped.

This effort represents an important experiment, one that seeks solutions in dark times for California education. Until education funding is bolstered this offers a reprieve. The law sunsets the program in 2018. It’s not a permanent fix for all that ails community colleges, but it gives students another option.

El Camino College in midst of historic Board of Trustees election

By [Rob Kuznia](#), The Daily Breeze

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It might not seem like it, but El Camino College near Torrance is in the midst of a historic election year.

For the first time since the college's inception 66 years ago, the parallel races for the two newly drawn up seats on the five-member panel are not happening at large.

That is, the only people who can vote for the candidates on Nov. 5 are the ones who live in the two trustee areas: Area 5, consisting of south Torrance and south Redondo Beach; and Area 2, consisting of Hawthorne and the unincorporated areas of Wiseburn, Del Aire and Lennox.

In every prior election, voters throughout the sprawling El Camino College district that spans the better part of the South Bay would select every candidate. This has historically put nonincumbents and low-resource candidates at a disadvantage, because it required running a campaign in an area the size of a congressional district.

This [overhaul of the election process](#) — approved by the board in February — surely has something to do with why this year's three-way race for a seat in Area 5 and a two-way bid for a post in Area 2 is, technically, the most hotly contested in a decade.

Vying for the Area 5 seat are Torrance City Councilman [Cliff Numark](#), university technology administrator [G. Rick Marshall](#) and business owner [Aria Shafiee](#). Competing to represent Area 2 are Hawthorne school board member [John Vargas](#) and Hawthorne City Councilman [Nilo Michelin](#).

One of those two will soon be El Camino's [first ever Latino trustee](#).

Despite the healthy number of candidates for an district whose incumbents often run unopposed, this year's races have been anything but feisty. Between the two contests, the number of candidate forums allowing the hopefuls to tout their views has amounted to a grand total of one.

Hosted by the Torrance-area chapter of the League of Women Voters, that event at the Torrance Municipal Airport on Wednesday night was only for Area 5, and only two candidates — Numark and Marshall — showed up. Shafiee didn't even respond to the league's invitation.

In general, Numark came off as the homegrown, politically connected overachiever that he is. Marshall, who sits on the Torrance Water Commission but is perhaps better known as a local government watchdog, is styling himself as someone who sits outside of the Torrance political establishment.

A graduate of Narbonne High, Numark, 44, holds master's degrees from Princeton University and the University of Sussex Engineering School, as well as a law degree from UC Berkeley. He currently works as the CEO of American Red Cross Southern California Blood Services Region. His list of endorsements includes the mayors of both Torrance and Redondo Beach, as well as the entire school boards of both the Torrance and Redondo unified school districts.

Marshall, 57, works as a technology administrator at the University of California Irvine Medical Center. He made a point to say that he is not a part of the Torrance political class.

“If you're looking for a political insider with the backing of the political class, I'm not your man. We need fresh ideas and different thinking. ... I offer you a choice, not an echo.”

One big issue that came up at the forum is the fate of a South Bay institution — the Southern California Regional Occupational Office, or SoCal ROC — that is only peripherally connected to El Camino.

SoCal ROC, perhaps better known by its earlier acronym, SCROC, is a hulking campus in Torrance filled with vocational educational classes serving mostly high school students.

In part because Gov. Jerry Brown has proposed that the responsibility for providing vocational education be shifted from K-12 schools to the community college system, there is good reason to believe SoCal ROC's days are numbered. Now, advocates of SoCal ROC are scrambling to find ways to keep it open.

Numark counts himself among those advocates.

“It is a vital institution for the South Bay,” he said. “My intention would be to fight to preserve it in its current form.”

Marshall has a different take, saying Brown's proposal — and therefore the center's fate — is not something the El Camino board can control.

“What we have to do is work with it,” he said. “I'm all for bringing vocational educational training right into El Camino, because that's the model that the governor is proposing. And I have to say that I agree with it.”

On the question of what they'd like to see changed, Numark said he'd like to see the college embark on more partnerships with the business community, in part to connect students with internships. He said there is some interaction, citing a relationship the college has with Torrance-based Robinson Helicopter Co., which hires many of the college's newly trained welders.

“We need to do more of that,” he said. “All of the departments should have advisory committees of local business folks to enhance the curriculum.”

He also wants to see more effective college counseling so students can obtain their associate degrees or transfer to four-year universities in a timely fashion.

Marshall also mentioned counseling, noting that the wait students must endure to see one is too long.

“I don’t think we should have to take a one-size fits all approach to the counseling of students,” he said. “I think there’s some students who maybe have to have a placement test, and if they seem to know what they’re doing, maybe they don’t need counseling. Maybe we just let them bypass it.”

In the race for the other seat, the two competitors are not only both Hawthorne politicians, they both work in the education sector.

Vargas, who has secured the endorsement of El Camino’s faculty and classified unions, is a founder of the Global Education Academy, an elementary charter school in Los Angeles.

Michelin, who boasts the endorsement of all the sitting El Camino board members except outgoing Trustee Maureen O’Donnell, is a teacher at Southeast Middle School in South Gate.

Vargas, 31, wants to see El Camino do a better job of reaching out to the Hawthorne community.

“In Torrance, they feel more attached to El Camino than Hawthorne (does),” he said. “I know we do have a communications department. I want to see it more active within my community.”

Michelin, 47, who sits on the oversight committee that monitors the spending of two voter-approved bond measures, says he doesn’t want to see the college float another bond.

“The people of Hawthorne have been very generous as far as bonds and taxes, but I think that limit has been reached, and there shouldn’t be any more,” he said.

Both Vargas and Michelin are South Bay natives with political science degrees from UCLA. Vargas is a high school graduate of the California Academy of Mathematics and Science in Carson (known as CAMS); Michelin attended Bishop Montgomery High School but graduated from Torrance High.