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Your Community College

Kevin G. Walthers: It's time for California education to meet reality

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed



Samuel Clemens, writing as Mark Twain, once noted that “the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.”

His pithy observation is quite instructive as we think about the future of higher education in California — and especially Governor Newsom’s audacious goal that 70 percent of working-age Californians should have either a college degree or workforce credential by 2030.

One thing is clear: we will not reach this goal if we obsessively rely on decades-old “tradition” to guide our thinking about which institutions can and cannot offer certain types of degrees.

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Over the past two decades, California’s community college leaders have worked to provide 21st century degrees; only recently has progress been made in the State to offer an artificially limited number of workforce-focused baccalaureate degrees.

The primary opposition to these degrees? “We need to stick to the Master Plan for Higher Education.”

Adopted in 1960, California’s Master Plan established a transformational hierarchy for the State’s three public systems of higher education. It assigned a research mission to the University of California, designating the UC as the sector to grant doctoral degrees. The CSU was to focus more on teaching at the baccalaureate and master’s levels, and community colleges would focus on general ed requirements, two-year transfer degrees, and career education credentials.

Perfectly suited to its time, the Master Plan was designed for a California population that was still overwhelmingly white, and college students were largely from upper-middle class and wealthy families.

The Master Plan is now older than 85 percent of all Californians and predates not just cell phones and the internet, but also three-point seatbelts, the Super Bowl, 911 emergency operators, and the Rolling Stones.

It is clearly past time to take a fresh look at how we ensure all Californians get access to higher education that meets their needs where they live.

We have seen some change to the original Master Plan intentions. For example, the CSU evolved its mission to include offering select doctoral degrees. But today, it balks at the thought of their colleagues at community colleges providing locally driven bachelor's degrees — even in places like the Central Coast and northern California where the CSU can't or won't provide broad access.

As leaders of public higher education institutions, we should ask if our goal is to serve all students or to “justify a traditional custom” that assumes all students have the means to travel hundreds of miles to attend college.

The community served by Allan Hancock College in northern Santa Barbara County (and communities served by many other colleges in California) has no access to quality four-year degrees that can provide an income suitable for raising a family in our state.

The Master Plan assumes that our students can travel over 100 miles to a CSU in Camarillo or Bakersfield to attend college. That is simply unrealistic. We know the reality is that too many of our students — predominantly low-income and first-generation college-goers — lack the means to fund such an expense and often have responsibilities at home that preclude them from moving away.

Other states have figured this out. In half of state educational systems, students are today earning baccalaureate degrees from their local community colleges.

These are typically workforce-based degrees that serve local needs, and we should

be doing that same here at home.

Instead of limiting the ability of California community colleges to expand access for all students, we should be adjusting the intention of the Master Plan to allow degrees that would provide the State with desperately-needed teachers, entry-level managers, and cyber security professionals.

California's public higher education system was the envy of the world for the latter half of the 20th century, but we now risk ceding that honor to others who are looking to the future.

We should be concerned that the Master Plan is Leave It to Beaver in a Modern Family world.

In all seriousness, expansion of baccalaureate access is critical to the future of California. Offering elementary education, human services, or professional studies at Allan Hancock College poses no threat to the four-year institutions in our state. We aren't recruiting students by showing them big-time college sports teams, indoor rock-climbing walls, Starbucks on campus, or food courts filled with their favorite fast food.

The student experience at any of our UC and CSU institutions is something I wish every young person in our community could experience. But for those who cannot move away to attend college, we should be allowed to provide options close to home that allow them to get well paying jobs that will support their families.

We shouldn't deny equal opportunity to our most vulnerable students just to maintain tradition. It's time to update the Master Plan for the 21st century.

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