



California Community Colleges

Remarks by Eloy Ortiz Oakley Chancellor, California Community Colleges

House Higher Education and Workforce Subcommittee
Public Hearing
Wednesday, March 17, 2021

Good afternoon, Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Murphy, and Members of the Subcommittee: I am Eloy Ortiz Oakley, a proud community college transfer student and I am pleased to serve as Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. I am honored to speak to you today on the future of higher education as we look to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. My remarks will focus on how our California Community Colleges are supporting our students to stay enrolled in and complete their studies, and how an effective partnership with Congress and the federal government can lead to an equitable economic recovery by investing in higher education.

First, let me tell you a little about the California Community Colleges. We are the largest system of higher education in the United States, with 116 colleges serving more than two million students in urban, suburban and rural communities. The footprint of our colleges cannot be understated. They are the primary pathway to educational and economic mobility for Californians and serve as the starting point for nearly two thirds of all California State University and University of California bachelor degree earners.

Like much of the nation one year ago today, our state went into an immediate lockdown to ensure the health and safety of our workers, families, and students. I want to commend Governor Gavin Newsom for his swift and decisive action. Our colleges acted decisively, too, proving that what we thought was impossible was indeed, possible. Difficult, but possible. In a matter of weeks, faculty and college leaders mobilized to convert tens of thousands of courses and programs to an online modality.

Equity is at the heart of everything our community colleges do for our students. The support of Congress has been critical to our system and our students during this time. The funds provided by CARES Act were used, among other things, to help our students and faculty purchase laptops and wi-fi hotspots, and as emergency financial aid to students who lost their jobs and, in many cases, were hungry and/or at risk of eviction or homelessness.

As we look to the future of higher education, the first and most important task is to ensure that students can attend, and afford, the cost of college. As you no doubt have heard, community colleges have seen an unfortunate and alarming decrease in enrollment since the



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start of the pandemic. Through a number of statewide surveys from California research organizations we believe that this is due to a variety of factors, foremost among them being that our students balance multiple responsibilities in addition to being a student. They are parents, they are primary breadwinners, they balance multiple jobs to stay afloat, they share the same wi-fi with a full household, or they may be hungry and facing homelessness. The economic devastation brought by the COVID pandemic has hit our lowest-income students the hardest.

When it comes down to it, a big factor in determining whether or not to stay enrolled in school is if you can afford it. We are appreciative of the ongoing discussions about tuition-free community college, and would note that California provides nearly \$3 billion in student financial aid to waive tuition for low-income students attending community colleges and four-year universities every year. These investments mean that more than half of all California public college students are able to attend without having to worry about working excessive hours or taking out student debt to afford tuition.

The cost of college goes beyond tuition; it includes textbooks and supplies such as laptops, housing, food, transportation, and childcare. We have used funds from the relief and stimulus legislation passed by Congress to provide emergency, one-time assistance to our most vulnerable students, but there is no future for higher education if our students cannot afford to stay in school. We need a stable, permanent system of student financial aid that acknowledges the true cost of attendance. This is true not just in California but across the country, where the movement to double the federal Pell Grant is gaining momentum, and we are pleased to support that effort. The California Community College commitment is two-fold – increasing financial aid to students to cover non-tuition related expenses, and scaling those additional student supports to ensure they meet their end goals. This includes streamlining the process for transferring to a four-year university as well.

Additionally, federal support is needed to ensure equitable broadband internet access for all Americans and close the digital divide. High-speed internet is no longer a luxury item like it was 20 years ago; if working from home this past year has proven anything to us, it is that every American household must have access to reliable, high-speed broadband. It is just as much of a necessity as gas, water, or power.

I would also note that community college job-training programs are critical to training America's workforce for the 21st century and ensuring an equitable economic recovery. In California, many workforce programs – including those funded by the federal Perkins Career Technical Education program and others – help expand and grow worker skills, and match employers in high-skill, high-wage industries with trained and qualified workers. Many of these are the “essential workers” who have been on the front lines of the COVID pandemic.



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Therefore, we strongly encourage the expansion of career and technical education programs that seek to strengthen partnerships between community colleges and industry sectors and provide new pathways to securing employment that pays a living wage. We also support further oversight of the for-profit college industry, which provides workforce education but so often leaves students saddled with significant loan debt and degrees of little to no value. We thank Congress for strengthening the “90/10” rule, which helps hold for-profits accountable for their reliance on federal aid dollars, as part of the American Rescue Plan stimulus package.

Finally, let me note that congressional action is needed to support our undocumented students. This is not a partisan issue for us; it is a moral imperative. An estimated 70,000 undocumented students attend California Community Colleges, with thousands more attending colleges and universities across the nation. Undocumented students are our future teachers, business owners, doctors and entrepreneurs, and yet they face an uncertain future without a permanent pathway to citizenship. We cannot have an equitable recovery without paving the road to codifying the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Let me close by saying that, when it comes to the fight for equity in higher education, now is not the time to take our foot off the gas pedal; now is the time to double down to ensure our students have the supports they need to be successful. They are our future. I am proud to represent a state and a system that leads with equity at the center of everything we do in higher education – but we cannot do it alone. Ongoing federal support, a partnership with the Biden Administration, the leaders of this Subcommittee, the entire Congress, and our partners in other states, will be essential to closing equity gaps.

I hope my remarks today have been helpful in highlighting how our nation can put equity at the heart of our shared vision for the future of higher education. I am, of course, happy to answer any questions from the Subcommittee.

Thank you.