ITEM 8
DRAFT

California Postsecondary Education Commission

March 2007

Challenges and Solutions Regarding Community College Service in Rural and Remote Areas: A Progress Report

This agenda item provides a progress report on the Commission's advisory committee that is examining community college services in rural and remote areas of the state. Two policy solutions under consideration by the committee are discussed. The item also describes a focus-group research protocol that is being developed to elicit student input.

Contents

Background *1*
Solutions under Consideration by the Advisory Committee *3*

The Commission advises the Governor and the Legislature on higher education policy and fiscal issues. Its primary focus is to ensure that the State's educational resources are used effectively to provide Californians with postsecondary education opportunities. More information about the Commission is available at www.cpec.ca.gov.

Draft Commission Report

Background

In December 2006, the Commission reviewed a progress report by its advisory committee that examined community college services in rural and remote areas. The committee's charge is tied to the Commission's desire to ensure that all geographic areas of the state are served adequately, as capital outlay funds are used to expand California's higher education enterprise. Outlined below are preliminary challenges identified by the advisory committee that were discussed at its December meeting:

1. How can community college districts that serve rural areas match diverse student needs with appropriate instructional and student support services in a cost-effective manner?
2. What funding and apportionment procedures need to be modified or enhanced so that rural counties that send significant property tax revenues to their local community college districts will receive reasonable levels of educational services?
3. What types of strategies might enable districts to advocate successfully for changes in administrative and legislative policies that affect community college service in rural areas?

This agenda item describes two solutions under consideration by the committee to address some of these challenges. Also discussed is a focus-group research protocol that is being developed to elicit student input.

DISPLAY 1 Regional Geographic Designations

Solutions Under Consideration by the Advisory Committee

This section contains a preliminary discussion of two solutions under consideration by the advisory committee to enhance community college service in rural and remote areas. These and other plausible solutions will be examined more thoroughly when the committee holds its next meeting in April 2007.

Solution Related to Off-campus Educational Centers

Presently, nine California counties with significant rural and remote areas have neither a comprehensive community college nor an off-campus educational center located within their boundaries. Some committee members have expressed concern that potential industry and business employers are reluctant to establish operations in areas that have little or no educational presence. Given this reluctance, many rural communities engaged in workforce planning efforts consider a strong educational presence to be a significant prerequisite to attracting a wider range of industries and businesses. In response to the challenge of establishing an educational presence, the advisory committee is considering the cost-benefit of a proposal that it might draft recommending that the State expend capital resources to establish an educational center in every California county. Shown below are counties that currently do not have a public community college campus or state-approved educational center located within their boundaries. Please note that some of these counties might have community college out-reach operations that are supported entirely by local bond initiatives or private funds.

- Alpine
- Amador
- Calaveras
- Colusa
- Del Norte
- Mariposa
- Modoc
- Sierra
- Sutter

The advisory committee is also exploring the advantages and disadvantages of a proposal recommending that the Commission consider modifying its *facility review guidelines* that require an off-campus community college operation to serve at least 500 full-time equivalent (FTE) students before it is eligible to compete for State capital outlay funds. Some committee members believe that a lower threshold would enable off-campus operations in rural and remote areas to start small, and then grow, as workforce and educational needs of rural areas change. A modified version of this proposal would recommend that community colleges be held to the same threshold standard required of the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU). Current Commission guidelines do not require that CSU and UC off-campus centers serve 500 FTE students before they are eligible to compete for state capital outlay funds. The CSU and UC must prepare detailed enrollment projections validating that any proposed educational center would likely enroll 500 FTE students during the first fall term of operation. The projections must be approved by the Demographic Research Unit of the Department of Finance.

Solution Related to Instructional Course Offerings

By definition, educational centers are rarely intended or established to offer a full complement of instructional and student support services, regardless of whether those centers are located in urban or rural areas. Because of a lack of *economy-of-scale,* instructional delivery tends to be much more challenging

in rural and remote areas than it is in urban and suburban communities. Part of the challenge is associated with the minimum number of course enrollments typically required for a course to be offered. Given a low population density in sparsely-populated rural areas, the number of students interested in enrolling in an academic or career technical course may be lower than the number of pre-enrollments required by most districts. If a scheduled course at an educational center in a rural area is subsequently cancelled because of low enrollments, interested rural students will either have to travel to the nearest full-service community college to enroll in the course, which might be distance of over 50 miles, or they will have to delay taking the course locally until the required number of course enrollments can be met. Such delay is one reason why it often takes rural community college students up to four years to complete a UC or CSU transfer curriculum.

It must be noted that districts try to schedule their course offerings to meet the needs of rural and remote students as best as feasibly possible. It is a tremendous challenge because spreading scarce instructional resources thinly over an entire district could result in a lower quality of educational services delivered. It is evident from reviewing long-range plans of various community college districts that the needs of students residing in rural and remote areas are considered and reflected in strategic planning initiatives of the districts. However, there often exist differences in what rural community residents consider to be a reasonable level of service and what a district considers reasonable, given budgetary and fiscal constraints.

A second solution under consideration recommends that the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges encourage districts to: (1) establish lower course enrollment thresholds for capstone courses offered at off-campus centers and out-reach operations in rural and remote areas; (2) use a higher proportion of local property tax revenues for instructional services in rural counties from which taxes were collected, while not compromising district-wide instructional quality; and (3) publicize course offerings earlier and more widely throughout rural and remote areas.

Focus-group Research Project

The advisory committee is developing a *focus-group research protocol* to engage students of rural and remote areas in a discussion of their community college experiences and educational aspirations. The committee will elicit student feedback before developing formal recommendations. Focus groups are considered one research strategy for generating in-depth, qualitative information on student perceptions concerning a particular topic or issue. Because the committee intends to videotape the discussions, it will be possible to consider facial expressions, body language, intonations, and participation along with the verbal data in interpreting the results. According to Vaughn, Schumn, and Sinagub (1996), such non-verbal factors aid immensely in understanding and analyzing the common themes and individual thoughts that emerge from focus group research. It is anticipated that student discussions will be held in Northern California, the Central Valley, and Southern California.

Shown below are focus-group questions under consideration. These and other questions will be refined over the next month.

Focus-group Questions under Consideration

Warm-up questions:

- Discuss some of your community college educational goals and career aspirations.
- From your perspective, why might community college districts want to establish college centers in rural and remote areas?

Main questions:

- Discuss your transportation experiences in attending courses offered by educational centers and community college campuses.
- How would you describe your present financial means and circumstances in relation to school and personal expenses (e.g., student fees, books, supplies, housing, and food)?
- To what extent, if any, are financial aid funds helping you to meet your college and personal expenses?
- How would you describe the level of access you have to college resources, such as counseling, tutoring, financial aid services, student health services, and testing and assessment services?
- Do you feel you have adequate access to the specific classes you need to complete your community college educational objective (e.g., associate or vocational degree or transfer to a four-year school)?
- Do you experience any difficulty in obtaining materials that you need for class, such as textbooks, library resources, and related supplies?
- Are there any specific types of classes you would like to see offered at rural college centers that are not currently offered?
- Describe the adequacy of technology and distance learning arrangements in helping you to meet your educational goals?
- Are there any particular educational challenges that you are experiencing as someone who lives in a rural or remote area? If so, what solutions would you recommend?