

EDITORIAL: Community colleges are preparing to rebound

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By The Bee Editorial Board

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Students pass the main fountain between classes on the first day of the fall 2013 semester at Fresno City College in Fresno.

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California's 112 community college campuses were forced to turn away about a half million students during the Great Recession. Their budgets were cut, forcing them to slash classes.

Now that things are better, they want to get those students back.

That's a good goal. Brice W. Harris, chancellor of the state's community college system, met with The Sacramento Bee's editorial board last week and outlined the colleges' twin goals now that the economic picture has brightened. With a gradual increasing of the budget for community colleges since the passage of Proposition 30, they are restoring classes for those shut out.

That's great news, especially as students may have been pushed into much pricier for-profit career colleges, out-of-state institutions or, worse, off the higher education track altogether. Here in the San Joaquin Valley, some students had to scamper between two or more campuses to earn credits because classes were full or had been canceled.

The second goal is to increase student success. To that end, a Board of Governors task force has identified 22 things the system needs to do, from re-evaluating whether course offerings and schedules meet student needs, to developing a website, salarysurfer.cccco.edu, that shows what a student can expect to earn for a particular career. Some of the recommendations are completed; others are in process.

One of the most important of those initiatives is the Priority Enrollment Policy, giving students incentives to get placement assessments and orientation and come up with an education plan. Another potential game-changer is the Associate's Degree for Transfer program to help students transfer to four-year colleges quicker by not accumulating as many non-transferable credits.

Not part of the recommendations, but still an intriguing idea, is the proposal to allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees. Senate Bill 850 by Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, would create an eight-year pilot program allowing colleges to offer one degree, called an applied baccalaureate, each in a high-need field. Harris said that increasingly employers are requiring that applicants have both a certificate and a bachelor's degree in certain career fields such as nursing, automotive and even culinary arts.

It's an interesting idea and certainly worth trying out. The community colleges need to be nimble enough to adapt to changing employer needs.

First things first, though, and that is restoring classes and opening the doors to those shut out in recent years.