

Dan Walters: California gives local colleges a new role

By Dan Walters dwalters@sacbee.com

With some fanfare, state Sen. Marty Block delivered a symbolic check last week to a San Diego-area community college.

It was for \$350,000 to help San Diego Mesa College offer four-year degrees in health information management in accordance with legislation that Block authored last year.

The fanfare reflected, in part, Block's somewhat embattled political position.

He will seek a second term in the Senate next year and faces a stiff, if unusual, challenge from fellow Democrat Toni Atkins, the outgoing speaker of the Assembly. Thus, he needs all the positive media attention he can muster.

That said, the fanfare was justified by the importance of allowing San Diego Mesa and 14 other community colleges to begin offering four-year baccalaureate programs in selected, mostly technical fields.

It's a historic breach of the Master Plan for Higher Education that has guided California's tripartite system of higher education for the past 55 years.

The plan envisioned that community colleges would offer two-year associate degrees and vocational training and prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions.

State colleges – later renamed state universities – would provide four-year and master's degrees in professional fields such as education and engineering.

The University of California would train higher-level professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, award doctorates in a variety of fields and serve as the state's major research institution.

There always has been as much competition as cooperation among the three sectors, particularly over financial support from Sacramento. They've also bickered over such issues as academic credit transfers from one to the other. But until recently, the broad demarcation lines of their academic turf remained intact.

The first major change came a few years ago, when the Legislature gave state universities limited authority to award doctorates. The second was Block's bill to authorize the pilot project in baccalaureate programs at community colleges.

California is a laggard, not a pioneer, in that regard since 22 other states already do it. We've maintained what has become an artificial segmentation even though four-year state institutions face more demand than they can fill, their costs have skyrocketed and the state has a looming shortage of highly trained workers, especially in technical fields.

The Public Policy Institute of California, among others, has warned of the coming supply-demand squeeze.

While ever-growing numbers of jobs demand four-year degrees, the state's supply of qualified professionals is diminishing as the large baby-boomer generation reaches retirement years. It's already evident in some fields, such as teaching.

It makes perfect sense for low-cost, convenient community colleges to help fill the void. Block says it will be a "game-changer for California students and the state's workforce."

That's true, however, only if it leads to a long-overdue revision of the master plan.