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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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Mike Rose on "A Society of Second Chances"

By UCLA IDEA

As desperate financial challenges hit California's three systems of public colleges and universities, the one that welcomes the most students seems to get the least attention. The California Community College system serves 2.4 million students and is the largest in the nation. As the University of California and the California State University systems cut programs, more students are looking to the California Community Colleges for available classes that they can afford to attend. But after several years of budget cuts, the community colleges have been forced to reduce enrollment. And more grim news comes from a recent poll finding that support for Gov. Brown's tax measure, Proposition 30, which would bring needed relief to community colleges, has dipping below 50 percent approval.

Why does the system that serves the most college students—and the most low-income students—get the least attention and some would say the least respect? Why does this matter? For answers, we sat down with UCLA education Professor Mike Rose, whose new book *Back to School* points to the pivotal roles played by community colleges, along with adult schools and occupational programs.

Your book talks about "second chance students." Who are they and why are they an important population to focus on?

We are witnessing this slow transformation of the face of higher education. For a while now the average college student has not been what we used to think of as the "traditional college student"—somebody who is coming out of high school and will take four or four-and-a-half years to finish college and then will enter a career. Now something like 44 percent of students in American higher education are not coming to college straight out of high school. They often have been in the workforce for some period of time. We have increasing numbers of undergraduate single parents and of people over 40. In the community college, the average age is 28 years old.

The economy being the way it is, people look for some small advantage by getting further education—a degree or certificate. Even before the recession, the changing nature of work, with the rise of computerization and globalization, meant that a lot of jobs that traditionally provided a decent living for people have been broken up and outsourced.

We are in desperate need of visionary and robust job creation policies. Education alone won't solve this problem, but it has a role to play, particularly with some kinds of work. Furthermore, for a lot of people, returning to school also has meaning beyond the economic. They talk about wanting to read and write better, to help their kids in school, to learn new things, to change the directions of their lives.

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Why and in what way do community colleges, adult schools and occupational programs matter for second-chance students?

Public institutions geared toward occupational training and workforce development or toward transfer to a four-year college are hugely important because they are affordable, and many of them are structured such that working adults can go to them. They have classes in the evening or programs are structured to meet the needs of people who work or who have families to care for. Further, these are institutions that often do try to do something about basic skills problems. A fair number of people we are talking about didn't do so well with reading and writing and mathematics, or it has been a long time since they were in school and they are rusty, so they need some kind of assistance to get up to par.

These are important institutions because they fill these niches for educational opportunity for people who are not on the educational fast track. Yet, there is a lot to be done to make them as effective as they need to be to meet these strong and varied demands.

We know that the success rate of these institutions often is not very strong. When we look closely at them we see why. The basic skills curriculum in many cases is inadequate or based on assumptions about learning that are outdated or flat-out incorrect and in many cases these institutions are just overloaded. In a couple of the colleges I visited, the counselor-student ratio is 1 to 1,000.

There is a lot of work afoot right now to try to change curriculum, change the way programs are structured, and modify the way they deliver instruction. The colleges that have risen to prominence show rates of greater retention, students meeting benchmarks, students achieving certificates or degrees. We have measures that show that they do better than institutions serving demographically similar populations. So we know it is possible.

How have budget cuts affected community colleges and their ability to help second-chance students?

Over the last three years the California Community Colleges have lost 450,000 students—students who are not able to enroll or enroll full time. Students can't get courses or if they do they get one course and maybe one other random elective. The courses they do take are overcrowded, so that means less attention and time with their instructor. Student services are being cut back. At one of the campuses I studied, the writing center, which is a really key place for second-chance students, has seen its staff cut by more than half. This has a devastating effect on second-chance students. It is taking people much longer to get a certificate or a degree or transfer to a four-year university. One of the criticisms of community colleges is that people are not graduating or transferring in high numbers or that it takes them really long to finish. Well, today, one of the reasons is that budgets are so slashed that colleges are working right to the bone.

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Californians entering the voting booths in a few weeks will have to make a decision on Proposition 30 that will affect the amount of money flowing to community colleges. Why should a vibrant community college system matter to voters who are not enrolled in that system themselves?

First, the community college is a place that produces people who fill some of the bedrock occupations in our society. Sixty percent of nurses and 80 percent of first responders—police, firefighters, EMTs— they come out of community college programs. It is in everybody's best interest to keep these institutions viable.

Second, the community college has functioned as a kind of gateway into higher education for generations of people, particularly people who aren't all that well off. In a lot of rural regions in California, the local community college is the one place where people can get an education.

Third, economists across the ideological spectrum would agree that the more education you provide, you're building human capital, getting people to read and write effectively and be more skilled at important jobs like medical tech work. But you also have lots of research that shows powerful secondary effects: People who are more educated are healthier; they pay more attention to their kids' education; they get more involved in political or civic life.

Fourth, providing these opportunities is what America is all about. America prizes itself as a society of second chances, a society where opportunity is present and people can always rise above their circumstances or improve where they are. When we erode educational opportunity we violate one of our most basic principles.

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