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Opinion: Valley colleges are already addressing LAO report

By Cheri Cruz

With the precision of a laser beam, California's Legislative Analyst Office focused attention and criticism on the state's three levels of public higher education.

Specific goals and performance standards, improved coordination, independent oversight and predictable funding are needed to bring programs provided by the University of California, the California State University and the state's community colleges in line with the needs of California and its students, according to state analysts.

The state's multibillion-dollar budget deficits and predictions that California soon will have a shortage of educated workers demand that the governor and Legislature reform the system, the report warned.

As California approaches the 50th anniversary of the adoption of its much touted Master Plan for Higher Education, analysts concluded the plan's effectiveness and direction has eroded. They compared California's higher education system, once a model for the nation, to systems in other states.

The comparison serves as the LAO's call for the governor, legislators, and college and university administrators to make swift and definitive changes that will ensure educational resources and tax dollars are being used to provide the best education possible to California students and meet the state's educational and training needs.

In their report, analysts claimed the various levels of California's higher education establish programs, allocate resources and adopt policies that serve and promote an institution's purpose, rather than those of the state or students.

The report is intended to be used by the Legislature and governor to craft and implement reforms. This will be a tedious, time-consuming process with uncertain results.

The 28-member Central Valley Higher Education Consortium isn't waiting for the Legislature and governor to act. Central Valley presidents and chancellors will meet Feb. 9 at California State University, Stanislaus, to discuss the report and its findings with state analysts.

Under the direction of board President Benjamin Duran, president of Merced College, consortium members will begin searching for ways to better coordinate

programs, improve transfer rates and help students succeed in obtaining higher education.

This continues a decade of cooperation that began with a conversation in 2000 between then-University of California at Merced Chancellor Carol Tomlinson-Keasey and California State University, Fresno, President John D. Welty that led to the consortium's creation.

The goal in establishing the consortium was to foster cooperation, rather than competition, between regional colleges and universities; to work with area high schools to better prepare graduates for college; to coordinate programs and qualifications that would meet the needs of California, the Central Valley and students; and to improve the rate of student transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions.

What is unique about the Central Valley consortium is the participation of the presidents and chancellors, who make up the board and lead cooperative efforts.

This commitment at the highest level has provided opportunities for over 200,000 students annually, even through difficult budget years. Valley colleges and universities continue to offer programs that respond to workforce demands, advocate for keeping fees manageable and more financial aid to be available, and provide access to higher education for all students. Higher educational programs available in the Central Valley range from certificate to doctorate programs.

Many of the concerns detailed in the LAO report, "The Master Plan at 50: Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts -- Coordinating Higher Education in California," have been recognized by consortium members.

The consortium's framework and its many accomplishments demonstrate what can be achieved when colleges and universities put aside their self-interests and commit to cooperating.

At their Tuesday meeting, presidents and chancellors intend to vigorously discuss the concerns and recommendations of state analysts, and search for additional ways to expand their cooperative efforts.

Cruz is executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, which extends from San Joaquin to Kern County.
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