

## **The Legislature should give community colleges a new, fairer deal**

*Editorial Board*

Published: 7:28 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 6, 2011

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board along with several statewide business groups want community colleges to do a better job ensuring that students complete requirements for associate degrees and career and technical certificates. They want to see more students transfer to four-year universities. Community colleges across the state also embrace those goals.

Unfortunately, state business groups and the higher education board want to accomplish them through punitive measures, which are likely to reduce state aid at a time when the schools are experiencing rapid growth. That approach, which the Legislature will consider when it convenes next week, would put the state in charge of slapping new mandates on community colleges.

Instead, the Legislature should consider a different approach that shifts more authority to local communities, which are paying most of the bills.

The mandates being proposed by the coordinating board and the Texas Association of Business would require community colleges to compete for 10 percent of their funding from the Legislature on the basis of graduation rates, course completion and other measures of student success the state deems appropriate. Those criteria also would apply to public four-year universities.

The timing could not be worse. The Legislature faces a budget shortfall of about \$24 billion for the next two-year budget cycle. Community colleges, like four-year universities, have had to submit plans for a 10 percent trim, on top of 7.5 percent in cuts from the current budget. Withholding an additional 10 percent of their state funding further strains their shriveled budgets.

Add to that the explosive growth happening at community colleges and technical schools that now enroll more students than the state's public four-year colleges and universities, and you've got the makings of a crisis.

The number of students attending public two-year schools, including community and technical colleges, surged 12.2 percent to 692,845 from 2008 to 2009, according to the most recent statewide figures. By contrast, enrollment at public universities grew 4.5 percent to 532,226. And community colleges are expected to continue that fast-paced growth because of the schools' affordable tuition rates, varied course offerings, open admissions policies and career and job training programs designed to meet workplace demands.

But even if the timing were right, the proposal is the wrong approach for Austin Community College and Texas' other 49 community college districts. ACC and some other schools are

voluntarily addressing low graduation rates and other deficiencies, so it seems premature to mandate solutions that have the potential of significantly reducing their financing.

Then there is the issue of local control. Communities that are paying the overwhelming share of costs for community colleges are better positioned to decide their goals — and the best way to achieve them. They have elected boards that are directly accountable to local taxpayers and voters. So their focus is solely on community colleges and the clients they serve. By contrast, the coordinating board is appointed by the governor.

We know that ACC clients are generally satisfied with the product, as witnessed by the vote of confidence the college received from several communities that recently voted to tax themselves to open ACC campuses within their boundaries, including the Round Rock, Elgin and Hays school districts.

The Texas Association of Community Colleges says the historical compact between community colleges and the state "is based on the principle that the state would pay for the cost of instruction and the community would fund the physical plant (classrooms, buildings and other capital projects) and other non-instructional costs."

The state has not kept its bargain. During the 1990s, state aid made up 60 percent of financing for community colleges. Today, state aid makes up less than 30 percent of overall funding for Texas' 50 community college districts, while local money in the way of property taxes, tuition and fees makes up most of the rest. Federal dollars contribute to that total. At ACC, the state's share has shrunk to about 22 percent.

Today, local communities are picking up much of the state's share of the tab. We need a new deal that gives local communities more authority in calling the shots.