

MAKE THE CASE FOR
CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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COMMUNICATIONS FOR CHANGE

Make the Case for California Community Colleges

Who should read this? Anyone who:

- Is in the public eye making the case for the important role of community colleges.
- Is trying to build public will for policies that support community college access and success.
- Wants the most effective messages on their side.
- Wants to improve student success rates.

Background

Building and focusing public will in support of community colleges is key, especially in tough economic times. State leaders are under the gun, facing huge budget deficits.

The state's community colleges receive seven billion California tax dollars each year; they will remain under scrutiny and will be compared to other publicly funded education enterprises. Their relative value is being called into question by policymakers as budgets shrink, despite being seen in a positive light by the general public. Often the needs of students and the need to improve student outcomes are swamped by all this money talk. So too are the important contributions community colleges can make to a vibrant economy.

Too often, however, community college leaders enter the fray using messages that either fail to engage the intended audience or worse, even backfire. This is particularly true in two cases: when defensive comparisons are made with four-year colleges, and when community colleges' challenges are attributed to the failures of the K-12 system.

This document provides recommendations about messages that will work and ideas you should advance or avoid. It counsels community colleges to take a stance that enables them to lead the change rather than be the victims of change at the hands of lawmakers.

In 2007, under the direction of the Neimand Collaborative, Harris Interactive conducted extensive opinion research to examine how the public views community colleges. Douglas Gould and Company then advised on a multi-faceted message development project that included an examination of the Harris Interactive data. The findings reveal clear messages that should be used by advocates and weaknesses that should be addressed through a process of continuously improving these vital higher education resources.

Detailed information about the methodology of the research and the findings can be found in the appendix.¹

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Economy is front, center and all over the place

Before reviewing the findings, it must be pointed out that priorities have shifted since 2007. Based on public opinion research conducted by Harris Interactive, we know that in 2007, 35% of California residents chose various education issues as the most important priorities for the use of existing state resources and systems. Since then, the economy has become the top priority. In fact, forty-six percent (46%) of California voters said in an October 2008 Rasmussen poll that the economy was the top voting issue. It's got to be higher now in the wake of the credit crisis.

¹ Harris Interactive full findings address both registered voters and the general adult population. For purposes of this work, which has a policy bent, we are using the data that tracks the views of registered voters. Here's why: registered voters are more engaged citizens. Policymakers pay close attention to registered voters, and registered voters are assumed to be more engaged citizens as voting is sort of the minimum pre-requisite to participation in civic life. If you have questions about marketing community colleges for enrollment purposes, you should consult the data reporting overall views.

Higher education landscape

Only about one in five voters feel very or extremely informed about California education issues at the state and local levels according to the Harris Interactive research. While most probably don't closely track higher education policy issues, Californians have an up close and personal experience of community colleges based on a lot of direct interaction with the system and reports from friends and family:

- 61% have been or are now students at a community college
- 64% have family members who attended a community college

Any dissatisfactions with or criticisms of community colleges are informed by this experience. And while you will see below that registered voters are not completely satisfied with community colleges, still 77% would recommend enrollment in community colleges to their friends or family.

Most think public education in the state from kindergarten through university has “gotten off on the wrong track” (65%). They see community colleges as part of a chain of upward mobility, but it is weakly linked to that chain.

Comparisons

Few seem to get the important role that community colleges play in the overall higher education system in the state.

- Only 16% indicate that they are extremely or very familiar with the high numbers of UC and CSU students who started their college career at a California community college – almost six in ten are unaware or vague in understanding that 70% of higher education students in California enter through the community colleges, and about 30% indicate they feel better about the community colleges after learning this information.

- When asked to rate how well community colleges are “currently contributing to the success of California residents,” fewer than a third rate them as contributing extremely or very well, lower than UC (44%) and CSU (37%).
- While they think community colleges use tax dollars more efficiently than the K-12 system, only about four in ten give community colleges high marks for efficiency.
- Community colleges get more public respect than the K-12 system. The Harris Interactive research showed about one third of Californians believe community colleges are contributing to the success of California and its residents; these numbers hover around ten percent when the subject is elementary, middle, and high schools.

Recommendations:

- *Avoid comparisons with other education institutions. From this and other surveys, we know that comparisons are not strong arguments and you will not likely convince people you are better. Raising this frame will get you nowhere.*
- *Stress the unique role that community colleges play and why they are essential. You help people from all walks of life get college degrees and marketable skills that help them succeed and contribute to the future prosperity of California.*
- *Position community colleges as part of higher education, not as part of the K-12 or “K-14” system, because higher education is more highly respected at this time.*

Aligning performance and expectations

During the survey, respondents were informed that there are 109 community colleges serving 2.5 million students, that full-time students take 15 credit hours per semester, and an associate's degree requires the completion of 60 credit hours. They were then asked to rate a number of activities in terms of importance and quality, revealing that the public does not think the community colleges are performing well at the tasks they think are most important.

This split between public expectations and performance ratings is a big problem that goes far beyond communications. The public wants

community colleges to do a better job and the colleges need to demonstrate their value to the public. Because they know you so well, you cannot simply tell them everything is rosy. Proximity is so close that you will actually need to prove the value of community colleges again and again.

While California voters are not too concerned about the time it takes for community college students to complete their studies, low completion rates are a vulnerability. Slightly more than half think it is important to "increase the percentage of students who complete a degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year university," and only eight percent think you are doing a good job with this.

Community colleges...	Extremely Important/Very Important	Community colleges perform extremely/very well
Prepare students for transfer to a four-year college or university	75%	37%
Help workers obtain new skills to pursue new employment opportunities	73%	27%
Prepare students for the workforce by providing job training or industry/technical certifications	72%	26%
Help workers upgrade their skills in their current job or profession	67%	25%
Prepare students for an Associate's degree	61%	38%
Help high school students get an early start on college by taking college level courses before they graduate	57%	29%
Provide lifelong opportunities for personal enrichment	55%	31%
Provide students remedial education to improve basic reading, writing and math skills	54%	21%
Help companies and employers provide customized job training	51%	15%
Provide English as a Second Language courses	46%	18%

Recommendations:

- *Where you are succeeding, fill in with facts to correct misperceptions when you have proof.*
- *Where you face challenges, engage the public as partners in fixing areas where performance should be improved.*
- *Shine a light on challenges, but point to solutions and work to implement them.*
- *You can't just talk about progress, you also have to make it.*
- *The poll numbers show that advocates should focus messages around workforce preparation, training and obtaining new skills rather than talking about basic or remedial skills.*

It's the economy that works

In national opinion research we oversaw in 2004, we found that people didn't understand the macroeconomic benefits of community colleges, especially the role they play in strengthening local or state economies. They tended to see only personal benefits, as with other forms of higher education.

Not so in California in 2007. Education is more valued as a public good in California. There seems to be a greater awareness that connects community colleges and economic advancement. This awareness is not "top of the mind" but it can be easily cued up, which is good for those trying to build greater public will in support of community colleges in a time of economic stress.

- A PPIC survey in November, 2008 showed that 68% say the economy will need more college educated workers in the next 20 years.
- The vast majority of people surveyed in the Harris Interactive research – 91% – believe that a better-educated population will strengthen California's economic future.

- Seventy-one percent of Californians agree that the state's community colleges should be at the heart of our future economic success. They have the opportunity to prepare and train the wide variety of individuals essential to a skilled workforce in today's economy.
- Nearly all Californians – 90% – believe that the education of California residents is one of the most important investments the state can make.
- Eighty-six percent of Californians think the higher the quality of California's public education, from kindergarten to college, the higher the quality of life will be in the state.
- Seventy-three percent strongly or somewhat disagree with the statement, "the current levels of education among California's residents are adequate and in no way threaten the quality of life or the future economic strength of the state."

Recommendations:

- *Prime your conversation with the statements above, particularly "a better educated population will strengthen California's future."*
- *Connect to community colleges and the role they can play in strengthening the economy and preparing the workforce for the future.*

Workforce

Directly tied to economic concerns are worries about the workforce and whether California is keeping pace.

- More than two in three (68%) are extremely or very concerned that the population of California is falling behind the level of education in other states and nations.

- Sixty-eight percent worry this “weakens the quality of our state’s workforce and damages our economy over the long term.”
- Seventy-three percent value the role community colleges play in helping “workers obtain new skills.”
- Seventy-two percent think community colleges must prepare students for the workforce by providing job training or industry/technical certifications.
- Sixty-seven percent believe community colleges help workers upgrade their skills or current professions.
- Seventy-one percent say community colleges provide local communities with an effective resource for workforce training and development that matches local economic opportunities.

Recommendations:

- *Tie the workforce to the economy and to community colleges as institutions that are at the forefront of the solution.*
- *The community colleges need to educate the public with more stories about their role in workforce preparation and adaptation to bolster public perceptions and increase support.*
- *Enlist business leaders and employers as advocates to make this case.*

Open access

There is high support, and pride, in California’s commitment to open access and low student fees for community college enrollment, but two-thirds of California voters would like to see more low-income students receive more financial aid. The public understands that community college students have unique life and economic challenges that often prevent the completion of degrees and certificates. More robust financial aid is seen as a way of making sure students can actualize the opportunity of open access.

At the same time, many community colleges face competition from private institutions with higher fees but stronger financial aid packaging that is a part of their marketing to potential students. Many of these potential students don’t know that community colleges could be a more affordable option in both the short and long-term.

Recommendations:

- *Speak out for greater financial aid by seeking greater state investment.*
- *Remember that fees are just one barrier to access and completion. Affording the time to attend and complete college is another.*
- *Do a better job of packaging financial aid options and offering robust financial aid counseling that tailors options to individual needs.*

Improving student success

As noted above, California voters are less than fully satisfied with the performance of community colleges:

- 71% strongly or somewhat agree that we need to do more to improve students’ success in the community colleges so that individuals can complete their goals efficiently.
- But a mere 15% feel the community colleges are extremely or very committed to “increasing the number of students who complete degrees, certificates, or transfers they seek.”

They have ideas about what would help, but aren’t happy with the level of progress they see.

What should be prioritized to improve the likelihood that community college students will reach their educational goals? How well do people think community colleges are doing with these services?

Services:	Extremely Important/Very Important	Extremely/very well
Academic planning and counseling resources	64%	11%
High quality career and technical education courses	64%	18%
Low cost of student fees	61%	25%
Better coordination with local and regional high schools	60%	9%
Financial aid resources that covers textbooks, housing and related costs	55%	10%
Better coordination with UC and CSU	48%	13%
High quality remedial courses for basic skills	47%	14%
High quality English as a Second Language (ESL) courses	39%	12%
Open enrollment without any admission requirements	26%	22%

These are eye-opening figures: open enrollment (access) is the only area in which community colleges reach high expectations. The public's strong desire for college access outweighs their reservations about community college performance. But we suspect this will not last for long, especially in a tight economy and a state facing a host of budget crises where even access is imperiled. There is much work to be done.

Recommendation:

- *We see appreciation for navigational services – coordination with high schools and four-year universities to align student preparation coming in and going out of community colleges; and, academic planning and counseling to help students be efficient and productive while in residence at the community college. This is a tricky message, as many see these as ancillary services in a tight economy. Highlighting their return in the more productive and efficient use of services leading to better outcomes is a powerful opportunity. Again, it is important for you to present solution messages rather than complaints when you address this topic.*

Money

After being informed of the per capita state funding for all components of the state's educational system, nearly six in ten (58%) think community colleges should receive more or much more financing, a low and soft number. Remember, fewer than four in ten think you use your resources efficiently. We believe that with the state's fiscal crisis, it will be a challenge to hold on to funding. The number of people supporting more funding will need to grow dramatically beyond 58% for you to see the legislature back expansion or even current funding levels.

Most think that open access and low fees are a positive feature of community colleges (72%). However, other research has shown that accentuating low cost and open access can cue up the idea of low quality and no standards. Community colleges for some can be likened to public hospitals—one is glad they are available in case of emergency or for those with no other options, but would never choose to use one otherwise.

More money may be the answer to community college insiders, but it is only one part of the answer

for the public and policymakers. A PPIC survey taken *before* the economic downturn showed that 51% of the public favored a combination of increased funding AND a better use of existing funds—with only 9% favoring increased state funding alone.

Recommendations:

- *Don't make arguments for money without simultaneously making the case for improvements in the efficiency, quality and effectiveness of the community colleges.*

Other big ideas to frame your case: Personal Completion and Transformation

While economic exigencies might dominate people's thinking today, in the long term, people see the value of community colleges in more lofty terms:

- They provide people with second chances to **transform** their lives, and do it with enough flexibility in scheduling and timing to meet their needs. (75%)
- They provide each student who attends an **opportunity to achieve his or her personal goals**. (74%)
- They are open to everyone and provide a wonderful opportunity for **individual growth and development**. (72%)
- They have a **unique role** in serving a wide variety of individuals with a wide variety of needs. (71%)
- The greatest value of the community colleges is providing a low cost and **close to home educational alternative** for high school graduates who are capable of university success, but need more time to identify their goals. (76%)

Recommendations:

- *When talking about the value of community colleges, prime the conversation with the ideas of personal completion, transformation and individual growth.*
- *Focus first on student outcomes and then on the institutional needs necessary to produce them.*
- *Stress the unique characteristics of community colleges. You help people from all walks of life get college degrees and marketable skills that help them succeed and contribute to the future prosperity of California.*

Ideas to Advance

Personal completion, transformation
individual growth and development

California's needs

Improving student outcomes

Economic impact

Workforce prep, training/new skills
workforce education, job skills training

Transfer success

Unique system/role

Part of higher ed

Improving student outcomes

Student supports essential

Ideas to Avoid

Low cost alternative

Colleges' needs

Bigger budget

Efficiency

Basic skills

Remedial and ESL

4-year comparisons

Not K-14

Fine as is

Make it on their own

Suggested case statement using the economic frame

How might we wrap all these messages together into a cogent “case” for our community college? Here’s one approach that pulls together the strongest messages.

California's economic future requires a better educated population. Educating its residents is one of the most important investments the state can make. The higher the quality of our public education system, the higher the quality of life for all.

California's community colleges are at the heart of our future economic success, a critical link in upward mobility. They should be part of our state's plan for economic solutions. They offer an opportunity to prepare and train the wide variety of individuals essential to a skilled workforce in today's economy and to help workers obtain new skills.

California clearly needs more college graduates for economic success. The community colleges can produce them. One third of last year's UC graduates and half of CSU graduates started in community colleges. With greater support, community colleges can help more people from all walks of life achieve a college degree.

Community colleges must also prepare students for the workforce by providing job training or industry/technical certificates and help workers upgrade their skills or current professions. They also provide local communities with an effective resource for workforce training and development that matches local economic opportunities.

But our community colleges can't do the job unless they have everyone's support. They need help improving student outcomes with better instruction, greater academic support and financial aid in order to help more people graduate with the degrees and technical skills they need for success.

Helping all students meet their personal goals does more than just promote their individual growth and development. Transforming people's dreams into reality creates economic benefits for their communities and the entire state of California—now and in the future.

Appendix

Methodology

Opinion research and oversight: Harris Interactive, under the supervision of the Neimand Collaborative with advice from Douglas Gould and Company.

Qualitative opinion research:

- Four two-hour Advanced Strategy Lab (ASL) sessions were conducted online in July and August 2007.
 - Policymakers (n=11): current or retired elected officials, staff members
 - Grantees (n=16): Hewlett and Irvine grantees
 - Leadership (n=17): representatives from the Chancellor's office, Board of Governors, Trustees, school presidents
 - Practitioners (n=23): Faculty, faculty leadership, administration

Qualitative opinion research:

- Audience: Representative sample of California Adults (n = 2,018)
 - Registered Voters: n = 1,503
 - Non-Registered Voters: n = 515
- Method: Online Survey
- Field Dates: September 13 - 28, 2007
- Sampling Error: +/- 2.2 percentage points in 95 out of 100 cases

Acknowledgements & Contact Information

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