California Postsecondary Education Commission

Challenges and Solutions Regarding Community College Service in Rural and Remote Areas: A Progress Report

December 2006

This report provides an update on the Commission's advisory committee that is examining community college services in rural and remote areas.

Three initial challenges have been identified and are discussed. These challenges are related to (1) student needs, (2) community college funding, and (3) administrative procedures and policies.

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The Commission advises the Governor and Legislature on higher education policy and fiscal issues. Its primary focus is to ensure that the state's educational resources are used effectively to provide Californians with postsecondary education opportunities. More information about the Commission is available at www.cpec.ca.gov.

Commission Report 06-15

Background

In March 2006, the California Postsecondary Education Commission embarked on a long-range planning effort to examine the challenges community college districts confront when trying to serve rural and remote areas of the state. The impetus for the study is tied to the Commission's responsibility to ensure that all geographic areas of the state are served adequately, as capital outlay funds are used to expand the states higher education enterprise. The following questions guided the Commission initial discussion, which involved a panel of educators and administrators.

1. What are some of the most difficult challenges confronting local districts in serving rural and remote areas? How might the Commission, as the State's higher education planning and coordinating body, be of assistance at the statewide and regional level?

2. What specific types of strategies and institutional arrangements do community college districts use to enhance educational services in rural and remote areas? What has been the relative success of those strategies and arrangements?

3. What proposals are currently under consideration by lawmakers and educators to address community college access issues in rural and remote areas?

4. Should certain aspects of program-based funding and the Commission's facility review guidelines be modified to better reflect the service-delivery and enrollment constraints faced by districts in serving rural and remote areas?

DISPLAY 1 Regional Geographic Designations

Following the March panel discussion it was recommended that a statewide advisory committee be established to assist the Commission in examining community college challenges in greater detail and to recommend viable and creative policy solutions. This agenda item reports on the challenges identified initially by the advisory committee. Appendix A contains a name listing of the advisory committee. It is anticipated a similar study will undertaken that examines challenges confronting the State University and the University of California. The next section provides definitions of the terms *rural* and *remote*.

Defining Rural and Remote Geographic Areas

Providing a precise definition of the term *rural* is not straightforward. For planning purposes, the U.S. Census Bureau defines a rural community as consisting of all territory, population, and housing units that are located outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters. Urbanized areas are those that: (a) have a population density of a least 1,000 people per square mile; (b) have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile in surrounding census blocks; and (c) contain 50,000 or more people. An urban cluster has at least 2,500 people, but generally fewer than 50,000. It should be noted that geographic entities such as metropolitan areas, counties, and minor civil divisions, often contain both urban and rural territories.

Some rural areas are made up of high, rugged mountains or stretches of rolling farmland, while other areas consist of barren desert. According to a report by the 1998 *Legislative Select Committee on Rural Economic Development*, the common thread that had bound all rural areas uniformly was their reliance on a resource-based economy. However, changing regulations and fluctuating markets have made dependence on a resource-based economy a thing of the past. It is generally understood now that rural economies are diversifying in order to be viable. With respect to state and county services, many rural Californians tend to struggle with inadequate roads and limited public transportation, high medical insurance costs, fewer educational and health care providers, unreliable telephone service, and limited access to high-speed Internet networks. Appendix B lists California counties that have significant rural territories.

For statewide and regional planning purposes, it is helpful to distinguish between the term *rural*, as just described, and what is practically meant by the term *remote*. As most often understood, the latter term refers to something that is located at an extreme distance or that is far removed. When considering access and equity issues, a *remote* area can be defined as a sparsely populated area within a community college district where the nearest California community college is more than 60 miles away. By this definition, the community of Needles, for example, would be considered a remote area because the nearest California community college is approximately 100 miles away.

Selected Challenges Identified by the Advisory Committee

The Commission's advisory committee met on October 27, 2006, and identified three thematic challenges confronting state-supported and non state-supported off-campus educational centers that are located in rural and remote areas. Another meeting has been scheduled for December 8, 2006.

Student Need Challenge: *How to appropriately match diverse student needs with appropriate educational services and student-support services in a cost-effective manner*

A key observation noted by the Commission's Advisory Committee is that students who reside in rural or remote areas reflect a diverse population of learners who have varying educational and student-support needs. In other words, *one size does not fit all* when trying to match services to needs.

With regards to distance education, it was recognized that high achieving students who are self-motivated are better positioned to benefit from distance learning opportunities when on-site instruction is limited at an off-campus facility. The limitation could be because of fiscal constraints, or because of low pre-enrollment figures that cause some courses to be cancelled. Students that are less academically prepared or that do not have the requisite learning styles or multimedia experiences suitable for distance education might not benefit from technology-mediated instruction, given their present circumstances. A related difficulty is that many rural areas do not have the necessary infrastructure to deliver instruction electronically, including high-speed digital networks

Another example cited by the Advisory Committee is that middle to high-income students who reside in rural areas are more likely than low-income students to have the financial resources to afford and maintain a personal vehicle to commute to a main community college campus to take lower-division courses that might be offered only intermittently at their off-campus center. Those that seek to transfer to a four-year university would be able to do so in approximately two years by taking a portion of their courses at an off-campus site and a portion at the main campus. Students with less financial resources might not be able to afford costs associated with a personal mode of transportation, including high gasoline costs, and therefore, might have little option but to take all of their required courses at their local off-campus center, assuming one exists. Because of limited course offerings, it might take these students approximately three years, as opposed to two years, to complete a UC or CSU transfer curriculum.

Committee members intend to compile a comprehensive list of the precise needs of diverse learners residing in rural or remote communities. Once this information is compiled, a major challenge for campus and district administrators will be to match and maximize educational services with student needs to the greatest extent possible, given fiscal constraints.

Funding Challenge: *How to fund community college districts equitably so that rural counties that send significant property tax revenues to districts will receive comparable levels of educational services.*

Until recently, *Program-based Funding* was the primary budget tool used by the state to fund community college districts. Funds apportioned to districts through this budget framework accounted for about two-thirds of total community college revenue, with the remaining one third awarded by the California Legislature to fund categorical programs, such as *Disabled Students Program and Services* (DSP) and *Extended Opportunity Program and Services.*

The work of community colleges had been divided into six program categories: (1) instruction, (2) instructional services, (3) student services, (4) maintenance and operations, (5) noncredit instruction, and (6) institutional support. Each program area had workload measures to denote relative need. The measures were related to certain standards detailed in Title 5 of the California Education Code. For example, the standard for credit instruction was intended to allow for a student-faculty ratio of 25 to 1, as well as to ensure that statewide average salaries for community college faculty would equal the average salary for faculty at the California State University.

One concern that had been expressed by many educators was that the state never funded the community colleges at the level implied by the standards. This called into question the usefulness of program-based funding. The Public Policy Institute of California noted that since the inception of program-based funding, apportionments had been slightly more than 50% of the amount deemed necessary according to the stated standard rates. A second major concern was that districts received funding for credit instruction at the same rate regardless of the actual costs of particular programs.

Finally, although a primary intent of program-based funding was to negate the disparate effect of local wealth on available revenues by subtracting-out local property tax revenue from each district's target allotment, the end result was that some rural communities that sent the state millions of dollars in prop-

erty taxes might not receive a comparable level of educational services, even though such services were believed by local officials and residents to be badly needed.

One significant occurrence mentioned by committee members was the recent passage of Senate Bill 361 (Scott), which fundamentally change the manner in which state funds are now apportioned to community college districts. The bill, which was signed into law by the Governor on September 29, 2006, expresses the intent of the Legislature to:

> improve the equity and predictability of general apportionment and growth funding for community college districts in order that districts may more readily plan and implement instruction and related programs, more readily serve students according to the policies of the state's master plan for higher education, and enhance the quality of instruction and related services (Legislative Counsel's Digest, 2006, pp 91).

The bill authorizes the Board of Governors of the Community Colleges to develop criteria and standards in accordance with statewide minimum requirements. The requirements acknowledge the need for community college districts to receive an annual allocation based on the number of colleges and comprehensive centers in the district, plus funding based on the number of credit and noncredit FTES. More specifically, commencing with the 2006-07 fiscal year, districts will receive $4,376 per FTES for credit instruction and $2,626 per FTES for noncredit instruction. Both figures will be adjusted annually for cost-of-living adjustments provided in the State's annual Budget Act. Career development and college preparation programs will be funded at $3,092 per FTES.

Although AB 361 provides equalization funding based on the size of a district, and rural access funding, a number of committee members questioned whether such provisions will significantly enhance the ability of community college districts to serve rural and remote areas. The Advisory Committee intends to sponsor a workshop on this topic early next year.

Administrative and Policy Challenge: *How to advocate successfully for changes in administrative and statutory policies and procedures that limit community college service in rural areas.*

Many public officials continue to advocate for administrative policies and procedures that would enable new community college services in rural and remote areas to start *small* and grow gradually as circumstances become favorable. Institutional and state-level procedures, however, often run counter to this advocacy policy position in order to foster economies of scale. For example, the *Facility Review Guidelines* of the California Postsecondary Education Commission require that community college districts that wish to open a state-supported off-campus center must be able to demonstrate that the proposed educational facility would have an opening enrollment of at least 500 FTES. Districts that desire to open a more small-scale facility in a rural or remote area can still do so, but the facility is not eligible to receive state capital outlay funding. Some committee members question the fairness of holding rural and remote areas to such a high initial enrollment threshold.

It also should be noted that rural communities often are more vulnerable than urban areas to cost-cutting practices that might be put into practice by community college governing boards during economic downturns. To illustrate, one community college governing board decided, as a cost-cutting measure in the aftermath of the state's 2001 recession, to terminate all facility lease agreements that supported educational operations in rural and remote areas of its district. Some educators would argue that the district, in carrying-out the wishes of its governing board, was leveraging scarce resources in a manner that would result in the greatest number of students being served. They caution that spreading scarce resources thinly over the entire district could very well result in a lower quality of educational services being delivered. Others argue that such resource allocation practices hurt those that are in greatest need

of community college academic and vocational services. Proponents of this view argue that administrative cost-cutting practices need to be more flexible and less rigid.

Next Steps

After the Advisory Committee has completed the process of identifying and describing all key challenges, discussions will be held throughout the state to solicit input from other relevant individuals and agencies. This will be followed by a series of focus-group sessions with community college students who reside in rural or remote areas. Finally, the committee will consider viable and creative solutions to all identified challenges and prepare a report for review and adoption by the Commission.

Appendix A: Commission Advisory Committee on Community College Service in Rural and Remote Areas

Committee Membership		
Name	**Title**	**Agency/Business Name**
Patrick Blacklock	County Administrative Officer	Amador County Agency
Joseph Brennan	Consultant	Education/Economic Development
Dale Clevenger	Planning Specialist	Community College Chancellor's Office
Angela Fairchilds, Ph. D.	President	Woodland Community College
Peter Jukusky	Executive Director	Colusa County Economic Corporation
Brenda Miller	Board of Education Member	Colusa County
Kay Spurgon	County Superintendent of Ed.	Colusa County
Richard P. Vinson	Supervisor, District 3	Amador County
Stacy Wilson, Ed D	Committee Chairperson	CPEC

Appendix B: California Counties with Significant Rural Communities

County	Estimated Population January 1, 2005
Alpine	1,262
Amador	37,574
Butte	214,119
Calaveras	44,796
Colusa	20,880
Del Norte	28,895
Glenn	28,197
Humboldt	131,334
Imperial	161,880
Inyo	18,592
Kings	144,732
Lake	63,250
Lassen	35,455
Mariposa	17,991
Mendocino	88,974
Modoc	9,700
Mono	13,563
Nevada	98,955
Plumas	21,231
San Benito	57,602
Shasta	178,197
Sierra	3,538
Siskiyou	45,819
Sutter	88,945
Tehama	60,019
Trinity	13,749
Tuolumne County	58,504
Yuba	66,734