



Responses to Questions From the Little Hoover Commission

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The Little Hoover Commission requested written comments to help inform its June 23, 2011 hearing on California's community college system. The questions from the Commission are posed below; the answers come from research by the California Budget Project on California's system of basic skills education, a four-part series titled *At a Crossroads*.

Question: What are the key functions and core missions of the state's Adult Education programs? How do these differ from those programs offered through the community college system? How do the student populations and outcomes differ?

California's System of Basic Skills Education

Two sets of educational institutions and three programs share the primary responsibility for addressing the state's basic skills needs: the Adult Education Program (AEP) and the credit and noncredit programs of the California community colleges. In the AEP, local school districts offer basic skills courses, with funds administered through the California Department of Education. Community colleges also design basic skills programs to meet local needs. In some communities, community colleges serve as the local AEP provider.

Basic skills education has three core content areas: reading and writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL). In the AEP and noncredit community college courses, these content areas are organized into two basic types of programs: Adult Basic Education (ABE)/Adult Secondary Education (ASE) and ESL. Each track is divided into skill levels, from beginning to advanced. In general, students can advance in ABE/ASE as far as completing high school or passing the GED exam. Higher-level basic skills courses offered through the community colleges' credit programs prepare students for college-level coursework. ESL constitutes three-fifths of basic skills education enrollment in the AEP and more than one-third of basic skills education enrollment in the community colleges.

AEP and community college basic skills programs have somewhat different missions. AEP basic skills courses emphasize primary and secondary education and ESL for adults of all ages. Community college

noncredit basic skills courses are equivalent to AEP basic skills courses in terms of content level: They provide instruction through the high school level, without necessarily expecting that students will continue into postsecondary education. Community college basic skills credit programs, on the other hand, have an explicit goal of preparing individuals for postsecondary education. The purpose of these programs is to move students into academic degree, transfer, and career training programs.

Who Does California's Basic Skills Education System Serve?

Until budget cutbacks beginning in 2008-2009, the AEP and community colleges served more than 1.5 million basic skills students a year – roughly equivalent to one out of 10 Californians between the ages of 18 and 45. There are some differences between AEP and community college basic skills students:

- **Latinos are a larger share of AEP basic skills enrollment compared to Latino enrollment in community colleges.** In the AEP, including community college providers, more than two-thirds of basic skills students are Latino. Of community college basic skills students who provide data on race and ethnicity, 44.9 percent are Latino.
- **Community college basic skills students tend to be younger than AEP basic skills students.** Basic skills community college students are typically young: Three out of five are age 25 or younger. In contrast, fewer than one-third of AEP basic skills students are age 24 or younger. As a group, ESL students in the AEP are even older: Just 23.5 percent are under age 25, and 23.2 percent are 45 or older.
- **AEP basic skills students have somewhat lower levels of educational attainment and basic skills proficiency than community college basic skills students.** Those in ABE and ASE programs average 10.7 years of school, while ESL students have an average of 9.7 years of school. In ABE courses, almost half of students are at beginning or intermediate-low levels of functioning. Among ASE students, two-thirds function at a low level – roughly equivalent to ninth or tenth grade. One out of six ESL students is enrolled in a beginning-level course; half are at an intermediate skill level. AEP students enrolled in noncredit community college courses have slightly higher entering skill levels than students of other AEP providers. The community college credit programs serve students at even higher entering basic skills levels.

How Well Are California's Basic Skills Students Served?

The AEP and the California community colleges use different outcomes measures, so our research was not able to compare the progress made by similar students across those programs.

AEP outcomes. The primary measure of student success in the Adult Education Program is the completion of “educational functioning levels” that reflect literacy and numeracy skills as measured by assessment tests. In ABE and ASE, one level is roughly equivalent to two K-12 grades. The majority of students who took basic skills classes through the AEP in 2005-06 did not complete a level by 2007-08, although many ASE students earned a high school diploma or passed the GED. Few AEP students returned for a second year.

Community college program outcomes. Not all community college students were seeking a degree, certificate, or transfer, but many were. Yet credential-seeking basic skills students were relatively unlikely to earn a certificate or degree or to transfer to a four-year institution within six years of entering community college: Just one out of five reached one of those milestones. In contrast, one out of four credential-seeking college-level students earned a certificate or degree or transferred. Thus, among credential-seekers, basic skills students were three-quarters as likely as other students to earn a certificate or degree or to transfer. Statistical analysis that compared students with

similar demographic characteristics found even larger differences. For instance, basic skills students were 52.4 percent less likely to transfer to a four-year institution than other students with similar characteristics. Among those who were successful in reaching one of these goals, basic skills students made a substantially greater investment of time and effort to earn credentials or to transfer compared to other students.

Question: How does the governance of the state’s basic skills programs affect student outcomes? How does California’s structure differ from programs in other states?

Tighter integration of all basic skills programs is needed to improve effectiveness. Currently, the disjunctures in the basic skills system, both across and within institutions, create costly confusion for students. In the absence of coordination, basic skills students lose time and money, become discouraged, and often drop out.

Findings from the *At a Crossroads* series suggest that the AEP and community colleges programs need to be restructured to improve student outcomes. This restructuring should be a common project, but many barriers make it difficult for community colleges and the AEP to coordinate or blend their services. Despite the challenges, states and institutions have been moving to improve coordination, using a number of models. Some states use dual enrollment, in which students can enroll simultaneously in adult education and remedial, academic, or occupational college courses. Dual enrollment allows adult education programs and colleges to share “credit” for students who are dually enrolled and receive funding for the services provided. Approaches that combine adult education with college content courses go one step further and allow students to bypass college remediation, using adult education courses to improve their skills to the level needed for at least certain college-level programs.

Some colleges have begun to merge adult education and credit-level basic skills education at community colleges into a single system, sometimes using dual enrollment to blur programmatic boundaries. Characteristics of these programs include common faculty qualifications, comparable assessment instruments, shared facilities and materials, integrated data systems, comparable budgets, and access to common services for students. To achieve the goal of a more effectively integrated basic skills system, the Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy identified two promising governance models:

- Combining or blending adult education and community college programs into one system within a postsecondary “department” that integrates adult education programs, noncredit community college programs, and degree programs.
- Building a coordinated network between adult education, postsecondary education, and workforce development through collaboration, alignment, and shared performance goals.

Some states have shifted responsibility for adult education from the K-12 school system to the community colleges. Other states have created an overarching agency that oversees both the state adult education agency and the community colleges. The goals of a single governance structure are to provide:

- Common ownership of the entire basic skills system and a single point of accountability for lawmakers and other stakeholders.
- Greater incentive and ease in integrating the various components of that system and improving the transition from basic skills courses into postsecondary education. Such integration may include linking courses, sharing faculty, and a greater ability to develop courses that integrate basic skills and occupational content.
- More efficient use of limited resources, such as sharing space and/or sharing counseling and professional development resources.

- Development of a common culture and vocabulary.
- Less confusion and clearer pathways through the system for basic skills students.

In California, the sheer size of the state and the decentralization of authority within both the community colleges and the AEP suggest that creating a new overarching governance structure is likely to meet with little success. Integrating governance of all basic skills programs in California – both credit and noncredit programs – would require moving the AEP into the community college system. In 2002, the Joint Committee To Develop a Master Plan for Education initially recommended this approach, although the final master plan dropped this recommendation. Whatever the reasoning of that commission, there are important questions about moving adult education into the community colleges. A more realistic first step may be to develop strong networks and linkages between the AEP and community college programs, as the state of Minnesota is doing. In California, such an effort is likely to vary widely among local areas, depending on the strengths of programs and partnerships already in place. However, it is unlikely that coordination among the AEP and community college programs would occur statewide without strong legislative incentives and continuing oversight.

Question: Is there a need for the community college system to clarify its mission around basic skills education? For example, should the state clarify what types of programs fall under adult education, noncredit instruction, and credit instruction? In your option, is there a skill level below which community colleges should not teach?

In the context of this question, the primary distinction among basic skills students is between those who want (or should be encouraged) to access some type of postsecondary education or training and those who are very unlikely to do so, especially older immigrants. This is not an issue of entering skill level – except perhaps among ESL students who cannot read and write in their own language – but of aspiration and possibility. There is considerable evidence that students at relatively low entering skill levels can function effectively in many kinds of accelerated basic skills programs, such as programs that teach English and math skills in the context of learning a vocational skill. Ideally, basic skills students would enter through a common door that would then direct them toward the set of programs and services that best suits their need. In our view, drawing bright lines between the systems would be a step in the wrong direction.

However, California should narrow the range of services provided with state adult education monies and follow the priorities of the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Currently, school districts in California are permitted to use adult education funds for 10 different program areas. In 2002, the California Joint Committee To Develop a Master Plan for Education identified ESL, ABE and ASE, and vocational education as state priorities for both adult education and community college noncredit education. Because community colleges offer vocational education, the recent decline in available resources for adult education programming underscores the need to target the remaining adult education funds even more narrowly to basic skills education.

Question: What is needed to strengthen the bridge for students who want to transfer from Adult Education programs into a community college to pursue postsecondary education and job training?

The longer students have to spend in remediation the less likely they are to persevere and attain a meaningful educational goal. Therefore, many of the recommendations of *At a Crossroads* are aimed at accelerating students' progress – for example, by facilitating transitions from one program to another, reducing the number of remedial levels, teaching English and math in the context of learning vocational skills, and allowing students to spend more time in the classroom. In fact, acceleration is one of the most important arguments for integrating the AEP and community college programs – and for better integrating credit and noncredit community college basic skills programs. Recommendations from *At a Crossroads* research include the following:

- **Assessment**

- The AEP should design and implement an assessment instrument that more effectively measures the skills students need to enter postsecondary education.
- The community colleges should rationalize the assessment process. Currently, dozens of assessment tests are in use and assessment practices vary widely across institutions.
- Assessment tests in both the AEP and the community colleges should facilitate the movement of students from one system to the other. Now, the differences in testing protocols are a barrier to movement.
- Each student, whether entering the system through the AEP or community colleges, should receive orientation and assessment upon entry that results in a tailored educational plan outlining an accelerated path to achieving the student's educational goals.

- **Instructional practices**

Both the AEP and the community colleges should implement more effective instructional practices, including student-centered models, peer group support, accelerated courses, and courses that teach basic skills in the context of occupational skills training. Practices that move students more quickly to their goals appear particularly effective. Acceleration strategies include:

- Developing assessment tests that more accurately identify each student's specific skills gap and then addressing those gaps through tutoring and supplemental instruction – that is, “mainstreaming” students who require only relatively limited remediation.
- Combining several levels of remediation into intensive, accelerated courses to reduce or eliminate dropping out.
- Allowing lower-level basic skills students to enroll in occupational certificate programs that do not require college-level English and math as an intermediate step toward a degree and/or developing “bridge” programs that prepare students for entrance into occupational training programs by teaching basic skills in a vocational context.

Acceleration appears successful even for students who enter with low skill levels.

- **Financial aid policies**

California should develop financial aid policies that better target and support underprepared students. One of the most important barriers for basic skills students is the number of hours they must work to support themselves. Financial aid is among these students' most critical needs.

- **Support services programs**

California should expand programs that provide academic and other support services to underprepared students. The dearth of services that basic skills students need, such as child care, transportation, counseling, tutoring, and mentoring, can also stand in the way of academic success.

- **A strong focus on the needs of English language learners**

English language learners make up more than half the basic skills students in California. ESL students who are successful in reaching postsecondary programs appear to achieve success equal to or greater than other

students as measured by grade point averages, the percentage of courses passed, and the number of degrees and credentials earned. Acceleration strategies are particularly critical for ESL students, who often cannot transition into college courses until they have reached intermediate or higher levels of ESL, a process that can take more than two years. Hours of instruction are strongly correlated with advancement, but higher intensity courses also must allow students to transition as quickly as possible from one level to another.

Finally, *At a Crossroads* recommended that California implement an accountability framework for all basic skills programs and develop a comprehensive, integrated data system. California lags considerably behind many other states in its ability to gather and analyze data across education and workforce programs. As a result, policymakers do not have the data they need to make informed decisions.

Question: Are there lessons from California's experience in aligning Career Technical Education programs between high schools and community colleges that might apply to its basic skills programs?

Our research did not address this question.