

From *The Sacramento Bee*

Peter Schrag: Community college initiative won't solve anything

By Peter Schrag -

Published 12:00 am PST Wednesday, January 9, 2008

It's no secret that California's community colleges are underfunded and have been for years. But the prime reason isn't inadequate state money, but the lowest fees in the country under a fee policy that costs the system and its students millions in federal grants and loans.

Now, with Proposition 92, the community college lobby wants to cut fees some more, from \$20 a unit to \$15, meaning a reduction from \$600 a year to \$450 for a full course load, and change state funding formulas to add yet another Rube Goldberg machine to the convoluted fiscal system already in place.

Net cost to the treasury: about \$300 million a year in the years to come, all advertised, of course, as costing taxpayers nothing. Backers of the measure, which is on the February ballot, also claim the fee cut will make community college more accessible.

That's misleading as well, since the fees represent no more than maybe 5 percent of the real cost, which includes living expenses, books, transportation and a variety of other expenses. For students who don't live at home, the fee reduction amounts to roughly 1 percent of the total cost.

And since fees are already so low, and would be lower still, many thousands of California students who would otherwise be eligible for federal Pell grants and student loans aren't eligible, even though they're otherwise qualified.

Maybe the most blatant element of the initiative is that its funding growth formula would be decoupled from growth in community college enrollment – as it is now – and instead tied (again in convoluted ways) to the number of Californians in the college-going ages and to the state's unemployment rate. As a consequence, in the words of the legislative analyst, "there would be no direct relationship between required (community college) funding levels and actual student enrollment."

The gimmick here is that the young adult population will grow faster in the years ahead than the number of K-12 students and thus faster than community college enrollment. In 13 of the past 16 years, according to the California Budget Project, the proposed formula would have raised growth-based funding at more than twice the rate of actual enrollment growth.

But the real stinker here is that the initiative disconnects yet another spending formula from accountability for how the system spends the money, and out of reach

of the Legislature. It does nothing to encourage the system to increase its low completion rates or otherwise reward success.

Consistent with that flight from accountability, Proposition 92 also changes the community college governance system, requiring the governor to appoint more insiders so that a majority of the system's governing board would be students, faculty members and present or former members of community college district boards.

Not surprisingly the proposal has divided the education coalition and the state's teachers unions. The California Federation of Teachers, which represents many community college faculty members, and many community college groups are strong backers. The California Teachers Association and the four-year colleges, which fear the negative impact of Proposition 92 on their own funding, are strongly opposed.

Proposition 92 is part of what's now a long line of ballot-box budgeting initiatives, most of them pushed by interest groups trying to guarantee themselves a piece of the budget, in most cases without additional revenues to cover the cost or concern about the effects on other programs.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who now faces a monstrous deficit and who used to complain vehemently about "autopilot" spending, has earned himself a leading role among the perpetrators. His Proposition 49 in 2002, designed to give him political credibility for his gubernatorial campaign, carves \$500 million out of the budget annually for children's programs.

His reduction of the vehicle license fee immediately after he won the recall election in 2003 costs the state close to \$4 billion in subsidies to local governments. His support of Proposition 1A in 2004 locked up an additional \$1.3 billion for local governments.

In that long parade, which includes the school funding guarantees of Proposition 98, this year's community college proposal is relatively small potatoes. But instead of addressing the major funding distortions in the system, raising fees and financial aid – much of which would come from the federal government – it locks in the distortions ever more tightly.

The community colleges, which educate more than 2 million Californians in hundreds of programs, far more than the University of California and the California State University combined, have a right to feel shortchanged. Their faculties teach more hours, offer more classroom education per dollar and get less credit for it.

But the pursuit of another special niche in the budget and the cheapening of the sticker price of a valued commodity aren't likely to advance the system's search for support and respect. If anything, they'll isolate it still more, increase tensions with the rest of the education system and further confound the state's priorities.

###

<http://www.sacbee.com/schrag/story/620371.html>

