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COMMENTARY

Beyond the Master Plan

The Case for Restructuring Baccalaureate Education in California

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Although a stunning success in many ways, California's 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education has been a conspicuous failure in one respect: California ranks near the bottom of the states in the proportion of its college-age population that attains a baccalaureate degree. California's poor record of B.A. attainment is an unforeseen consequence of the Master Plan's restrictions on access to 4-year baccalaureate institutions. In a cost-cutting move, the framers of the Master Plan restricted eligibility for admission to the University of California and the state colleges (later the California State University) to the top eighth and top third, respectively, of the state's high school graduates.

As a result, explain Saul Geiser and Richard C. Atkinson in the January 2013 issue of the *California Journal of Politics and Policy*, 2-year institutions have absorbed the vast majority of enrollment growth in California higher education. In addition to their important role in vocational education, the California Community Colleges now enroll between 40% and 50% of all students seeking a B.A., including those at both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Enrollment at 4-year institutions, however, has not kept pace. California now ranks last among the states in the proportion of its college students that attend a 4-year institution.

Geiser and Atkinson present comparative data demonstrating the powerful relationship between 4-year college enrollment and B.A. attainment across the 50 states. Although California's low rate of baccalaureate attainment is sometimes blamed on the failure of community colleges to produce more transfers, the data reveal a more fundamental problem–California's 4-year sector is simply too small in relation to the size of its college-age population. The state urgently needs to expand 4-year enrollment capacity in order to improve B.A. attainment for the new, more diverse generation of Californians now reaching college age.

Yet building expensive new 4-year campuses is an unlikely option given the state's current and foreseeable fiscal circumstances. The alternative is to restructure California's existing postsecondary system. The paper reviews a variety of baccalaureate reform models that have been introduced in other states. The most promising of these models involve collaborations between community colleges and state universities to create new kinds of intermediary, "hybrid" institutions.

Examples include university centers and 2-year university branch campuses. Under the university center model, 4-year universities offer upper-division coursework at community college campuses, enabling "place bound" students to complete their baccalaureate degree program there. Under the 2-year university branch model, some community colleges are converted into lower-division satellites of state universities. What these and other hybrid models have in common is that they help bridge the divide between 2-year and 4-year institutions, enabling more students to enter baccalaureate programs directly from high school and eliminating the need for transfer.

Amending the Master Plan in this manner need not alter its essential features. The Master Plan's differentiation of mission among

research universities, comprehensive 4-year campuses, and open-access community colleges has worked well in encouraging the three segments to pursue excellence in their respective spheres, thereby avoiding the costly competition for resources and prestige often seen in other states. While preserving the different missions of UC, CSU, and the California Community Colleges, the need now is to improve their collective capacity to support baccalaureate education–the one mission that all three segments share.

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The full study is in Saul Geiser and Richard C. Atkinson, "Beyond the Master Plan: The Case for Restructuring Baccalaureate Education in California." *California Journal of Politics and Policy,* vol. 4, January 2013, 67-123.

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