


First in Line: Student Registration Priority in Community Colleges

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Abstract

Across the United States, community colleges are facing severe funding reductions and surging enrollment, resulting in a condition of impaction in which demand for coursework exceeds financial or physical capacity. In turn, impaction is necessitating changes in enrollment management policies, including rapid evolution in registration priority policies, which ration access to coursework by granting preferential course enrollment timing to students who meet specified criteria. During times of impaction, such policies effectively preclude some groups of students from making progress toward their goals or, under the worst circumstances, from attending college at all. Given the importance of community colleges for providing access to postsecondary education, these policies have significant, long-term implications. Here, we situate the discourse on registration priority policies in a larger context and body of literature, document the variation in policies across the colleges in one state, and develop a set of recommendations for policy and future research.

Keywords

community college, student, registration, enrollment, priority, management

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Background

Introduction

As “open door” institutions, community colleges play a critical role in providing access to higher education, particularly for students from underrepresented and economically disadvantaged groups, first-generation students, and students in nontraditional circumstances (Hagedorn, 2010; Lovell, 2007; Mullin, 2012). Through the multiple missions of workforce development, transfer, and community education (Bahr, 2013a), community colleges have helped generations of students who otherwise would have been excluded from postsecondary pursuits to obtain a college education and all of the associated benefits in terms of employment prospects and life circumstances (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). However, the capacity of community colleges to continue their open-access policies and fulfill these missions currently is being threatened by the confluence of drastic budget cuts and soaring student demand (Rhoades, 2012). These forces have resulted in an intensive reevaluation of the fundamental priorities of community colleges—a reevaluation that has focused largely on the enrollment management policies of these institutions, particularly those policies that concern the assignment of student registration priority (e.g., Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges, 2012; Taylor, 2011). In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that the “open door” to postsecondary education provided by community colleges is at risk of closing.

In this article, we discuss the context in which the rapid evolution in registration priority policies is occurring, and we situate the subject of registration priority policies in the larger body of literature on enrollment management. We then discuss the current discourse in one state concerning registration priority policies for community colleges, and we describe the commonalities and variation in registration priority policies across the community colleges of that state. We conclude by offering our recommendations for policy in this area and developing a research agenda to advance understanding of the implications of registration priority policies for community college students.

In addition to the value of this work for understanding the impact of the particular body of policies of interest here, our research represents an important effort to develop understanding of the impact of institutional policies generally, which one might describe as “mid-range” policies in contrast to broader state or federal policies. This is a vital (but frequently neglected) perspective insofar as institutional policies do not always reflect accurately the goals of state or federal policies and, at times, may directly undermine these goals (see, e.g., the discussion offered by the The Institute for College Access & Success, 2007).

Current and Historical Context

The financial difficulties and associated capacity constraints that community colleges are facing can be attributed, in large part, to the recent economic recession in the United States (Beach, 2011). Yet, the present economic circumstances are not unique. Instead, the cyclical “highs” and “lows” of the economy have affected community colleges in the past as well, though perhaps not to the same degree as is observed today (Bragg, 2011; Hendrick, Hightower, & Gregory, 2006; Phelan, 2000; Sheldon, 2003; Shulock & Moore, 2005). Similar issues arose for community colleges in the early 1990s and early 2000s and undoubtedly will reoccur in the future (Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, 2005; Community College League of California, 1992; Hayward, Jones, McGuinness, Timar, & Shulock, 2004; McCurdy, 1994; Mullin, 2010a; Walters, 1994).

As a result of the most recent recession, state appropriations for higher education have decreased substantially (McGuinness, 2011). For example, during the 2009 fiscal year, Alabama experienced a 19.4% decrease in higher education funding, South Carolina’s postsecondary funding shrank by 18.9%, and California reduced higher education expenditures by 12.3% (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010). Without question, the reductions would have been much more severe had it not been for the funds provided to the states by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 (Hagedorn, 2010). Yet, now that this source of federal funds has expired, state appropriations again have decreased by an estimated 4.0% from 2011 to 2012, or 7.5% from the “peak” of recession spending including ARRA funds (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2012). Moreover, regardless of the level of economic recovery, it seems unlikely that there will be significant improvements over the next decade in state appropriations for the community college sector because relative state support for community colleges has been flat or trending downward for some time (Beach, 2011; Delta Cost Project, 2009; Phelan, 2000).

Compounding the financial woes of community colleges, the same economic forces that are driving decreased funding are producing increased demand for community college instruction (Beach, 2011; Bragg, 2011). Increased costs of attendance at 4-year universities are leading more students to view the community college as the most affordable and viable option for a postsecondary education (Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Rhoades, 2012). Simultaneously, more stringent admission requirements at 4-year universities (driven largely by budget reductions) are forcing more students who otherwise would choose a 4-year institution to attend a community college instead (Hagedorn, 2010; Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012;

Sheldon, 2003; Shulock & Moore, 2005). In addition, high unemployment and changing job market opportunities are elevating demand for the vocational and workforce-readiness education provided by community colleges (Edwards & Leichty, 2009; Mullin & Phillipe, 2009).

The convergence of these forces places a serious strain on the already diminished capacity of community colleges and likely will continue to do so for some time to come (Edwards & Leichty, 2009; Hayward et al., 2004; Hendrick et al., 2006). For example, between 2007 and 2009, the number of students who were enrolled in for-credit courses in community colleges increased by nearly 17% and the number of full-time students increased by more than 24% (Mullin & Phillipe, 2009). In fact, taken together, cuts in state appropriations and increased demand for a community college education have led to a condition of impaction in many community colleges (Phillipe & Mullin, 2011), which is student demand that exceeds the financial and/or physical capacity of the institution. That is, a state of *de facto* “seat rationing” exists in many community colleges (Pearson Foundation, 2011), compelling a reevaluation of enrollment management policies and, in turn, a reconsideration of the foundational tenet of open access.

Much of the literature that assesses the consequences of large-scale financial crises for community colleges has focused on California. This focus is understandable in light of the pivotal role that community colleges play in California’s *Master Plan for Higher Education*, the heavy reliance on state appropriations to fund the California Community College (CCC) system, and the fact that the CCC system educates nearly one quarter of community college students nationwide (Beach, 2011; Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011a; Hayward et al., 2004; McCurdy, 1994; Murphy, 2004; Shulock & Moore, 2005; Taylor, 2011). Because the current financial and capacity pressures on community colleges are documented more thoroughly in California than in some other states, we often will focus on California in this article. Our analysis of California provides a framework for understanding the impact of these problems on the enrollment management policies of community colleges across the United States, particularly those policies that concern student registration priority.

To be clear, though, fiscal challenges that are comparable to those in California are being observed in many other states (Rhoades, 2012). For example, Arizona’s community colleges experienced a 50% reduction in state funding in 2011, leading some colleges to consider implementing admissions selectivity measures (Luzer, 2011). Likewise, Texas community colleges are now operating at the lowest level of funding per contact hour since 1982 (Texas Association of Community Colleges, 2011), which hinders the capacity of these institutions to serve the nearly two thirds of Texas students

who begin their postsecondary education in the state's community colleges (Lane, 2011; Paredes, 2012). Hence, though we focus on California, our findings have national implications.

Community College Funding Model

The impact of the current economic crisis on community colleges cannot be understood fully outside of the context of how community colleges typically are funded. In California, as in other states, funding for community colleges flows from multiple sources, such as the state general fund, local property taxes, student fees, state lottery, the federal government, and other sources (Beach, 2011; Delta Cost Project, 2009; Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Phelan, 2000; Shulock & Moore, 2007).¹ Nationally, state and local funds account for 54% to 58% of community college revenue, and tuition and fees contribute another 16% to 17% (Baum, Little & Payea, 2011; Mullin, 2010b). In contrast, nearly three quarters of funding for California's community colleges comes from the state's general fund and local property taxes, while student fees account for less than 5% of total revenues (Edwards & Leichty, 2009; Murphy, 2004).

Broadly speaking, when compared to the other sectors of California's public higher education system, the CCC system receives the least amount of funding per student (Hayward et al., 2004; Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012; Murphy, 2004). When all major sources are considered, funding per full-time equivalent student (FTES) is less than one half the funding received by the California State University (CSU) system and less than one quarter that of the University of California (UC) system (Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011b). The portion of this funding that is derived from state appropriations also is substantially lower. State appropriations for each FTES in the CCC system is approximately 60% of that allocated to the CSU system and 33% of that allocated to the UC system (Shulock & Moore, 2007; Taylor, 2010). Yet, legislatively controlled enrollment fees and other fiscal and legal constraints dictate that the community colleges must rely more on state funding to perform the costly functions associated with serving a diverse student population than do their 4-year counterparts (Edwards & Leichty, 2009; Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Pollock, 2006; Sheldon, 2003). This funding structure constrains the ability of community colleges in California to control their fiscal vitality during economic downturns (Beach, 2011).

The lion's share of funding in a given year for the CCC system is based on a complex formula and annual legislative negotiations that draw heavily on the level of funding in the previous year and estimated growth in the

population served (Murphy, 2004). However, little consideration is given to *actual* growth in a given year, resulting in a *de facto* enrollment cap on the CCC system (Edwards & Leichty, 2009). As Hayward et al. (2004) explain, “California pays for no FTE students above the enrollment cap” (p. 20). The result is substantial gaps between the number of students needing services and the number for which colleges receive funding (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2009; Community College League of California, 1992). Moreover, budgetary limitations on enrollment growth for the UC and CSU systems exacerbate enrollment demand by redirecting students back to the community colleges (Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012; Shulock & Moore, 2005; Varlotta, 2010).

Response to the Budget Crisis in the CCC System

As in other states, the financial situation for California’s community colleges is dismal (Rhoades, 2012). The CCC system budget was cut by US\$502 million in 2011, including a mid-year budget cut of US\$102 million (Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011a). In total, the community colleges in California have experienced US\$769 million in budget cuts since the 2009-2010 fiscal year and are anticipating an additional US\$149 million mid-year reduction in 2012 (Community College League of California, 2012). Considered from a different perspective, spending per FTES was lower in 2009-2010 than it was in 1995-1996, after adjusting for inflation. With the most recent series of cuts, spending per FTES has fallen even further.

Although revenues from student enrollment fees account for only a small portion of total revenues for the CCC system, during times of financial difficulty the California legislature occasionally increases student enrollment fees to mitigate the impact of budget cuts from other revenue sources (Edwards & Leichty, 2009). The state has enacted this strategy five times since initially imposing an enrollment fee in 1984-1985, including twice in the last 2 years (Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011a; Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Murphy, 2004; Shulock & Moore, 2005; Walters, 1994), resulting in a tripling of fees for community college students over the last 20 years (Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012). However, increases in student enrollment fees for the CCC system generally do not increase the “bottom-line” revenue of the community colleges because 98% of the revenue from enrollment fees is used to offset the total general fund obligation of the state (Edwards & Leichty, 2009; Murphy, 2004; Shulock & Moore, 2007).

In addition to the legislatively enacted increases in enrollment fees, the colleges of the CCC system have sought to reduce expenditures and supplement revenues in a wide variety of ways (Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011a, 2011b). Yet, despite these efforts, the CCC system still is faced with a severe shortfall in funding and heightened enrollment demand that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future (Little Hoover Commission, 2012). For example, it is estimated that the 2011-2012 budget effectively excluded 670,000 students from the community colleges in California (Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges, 2011a). In response, the colleges of the CCC system are reevaluating their enrollment management policies to determine how best to allocate space and resources to students, including substantial changes to student registration priority policies (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2009; Little Hoover Commission, 2012).

Enrollment Management

Strategic Enrollment Management in Community Colleges

Registration priority policies may be situated in a larger body of discourse on strategic enrollment management, much of which focuses on 4-year institutions. In the context of 4-year institutions, Hossler (1984) explained that enrollment management is a process "that influences the size, the shape, and the characteristics of a student body by directing institutional efforts in marketing, recruitment, and admissions, as well as pricing and financial aid" (p. 6). The particular expression of this process is influenced by an institution's "goals, history, resources, and politics" and, ideally, incorporates a wide range of internal functions, such as student services, financial aid, and institutional research (Hossler & Kemerer, 1986, p. 7).

Derived from the broader field of enrollment management, *strategic enrollment management* (SEM) places greater emphasis on long-term institutional goals and integrative strategic planning to achieve and maintain optimal rates of student recruitment, retention, and graduation (Gowen & Owen, 1991; Wilkinson, Taylor, Peterson, & Machado-Taylor, 2007). Moreover, SEM emphasizes active cross-campus collaboration in the pursuit of institutional mission, vision, and priorities. Hence, Huddleston (2000) suggests that SEM represents an integration of seven primary functional areas: institutional research and planning, marketing, admissions, registrar, financial aid, student orientation, and retention and advising (p. 66). Hossler (2008) adds to this list the increasingly important activity of monitoring public policy trends in funding at the federal and state level.

However, the expression and execution of SEM in community colleges differs substantially from that of 4-year institutions (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1999, 2009; Kerlin, 2009; Pollock, 2006; Shulock & Moore, 2005). Community colleges generally neither recruit students based on their likelihood of graduating nor consider previous academic performance as a condition of admission (McCurdy, 1994; Mullin, 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2007). Moreover, resources to support institutional research, marketing, retention, and advising often are sorely limited in community colleges. Thus, as discussed in the literature, SEM does not reflect adequately the unique role of community colleges as largely state-supported, open-access institutions that function to meet the great breadth of needs of students in their respective local communities. In fact, the funding structure and multiple missions of community colleges generally limit them to two primary SEM options that may be employed on a large scale for substantial effect. These options include: (a) controlling the supply of postsecondary opportunity by reducing the number and adjusting the nature of course offerings and (b) controlling the demand for postsecondary opportunity by rationing access to limited course “seats” through student registration priority policies (Shulock & Moore, 2005).²

Managing Course Offerings

The effect of impaction and decreased state funding, considered together or individually, create an environment in which community colleges are forced to make critical evaluations about the number and nature of the courses that are offered (Murphy, 2004; Rhoades, 2012). Factors that an institution may consider include student demand for a given course, the cost of offering the course, and the degree of alignment of the course with larger institutional, community, or state priorities (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2009). For example, institutions may increase class sizes for courses that are in high demand, while eliminating courses that do not meet a particular enrollment threshold or that are expensive to maintain, such as those associated with technical or vocational programs (Sheldon, 2003; Walters, 1994).

The implications of this SEM approach are important to note. Reductions in course offerings or limitations on the times and days on which courses are offered reduces access to coursework for nontraditional students who work, have a family for which they must provide care, or have other commitments that place limitations on their participation in postsecondary education (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2002). In turn, the reduction in access decreases the rate at which such students are able to complete coursework and make progress toward their educational goals (Sheldon, 2003).

In addition, reducing course offerings during a period of elevated demand for instruction exacerbates the problem of impaction, increasing competition for the declining number of course “seats” (Shulock & Moore, 2005). As Murphy (2004) described the problem, “access to those [limited] seats is a function of whoever is savvy, lucky, or quick enough to register for the course” (p. 48). Unfortunately, it seems clear that first generation and nontraditional students, who typically are less familiar with how to navigate the complex postsecondary environment and frequently have less flexibility around their participation in higher education, often lose this competition (Rhoades, 2012; Sheldon, 2003; Shulock & Moore, 2005). Thus, elevated competition for courses further limits postsecondary access for those students who historically have depended on the community college as the point of entry to higher education and further reduces the comparatively low chances that these students will complete credentials or transfer to a 4-year institution (Hagedorn, 2010). As McCurdy (1994) described it, only the “illusion of access” to postsecondary education is maintained (p. 1).

Managing Student Enrollment Through Registration Priority Policies

Either alone or in combination with managing course offerings, registration priority policies gives preferential timing in course enrollment to students who meet particular criteria, such as completing a set number of course credits, demonstrating substantial progress toward completing a degree, or maintaining membership in a specified group (Phelan, 2000; Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges, 2012; Walters, 1994). Registration priority takes the form of a series of registration ranks. Students who are assigned to a higher rank are allowed to register for courses earlier than are students who are assigned to a lower rank.

Community colleges employ registration priority policies both in times of financial abundance and in times of scarcity. In times of abundance, registration priority often is used to encourage student persistence and success, serving primarily as a reward for prior progress toward a given outcome that is deemed to be of substantive value by the institution. During such times, registration priority may affect a student’s academic progress only minimally.

However, when course seats are limited due to reduced course offerings and excess demand for enrollment, colleges may be forced to implement strict registration priority policies in order to ensure the achievement of institutional, system, or state priorities (Hendrick et al., 2006; Phelan, 2000; Walters, 1994). In particular, the college prioritizes the course enrollments of students who exhibit particular characteristics or behaviors that are consistent

with the principal goals of the institution, system, or state, while simultaneously de-prioritizing the course enrollments of other students. Consequently, students who are placed in higher ranks generally are assured the courses that they need to complete their programs of study, thereby maintaining or accelerating their progress (Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges, 2012). Conversely, students who are placed in lower ranks may be unable to obtain “seats” in necessary courses, slowing their progress, or may be excluded entirely from the community college by a combination of full courses and personal circumstances that limit the days and times at which courses may be taken (Bahr, 2012a; Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Rhoades, 2012; Spurling, 2000).

Though empirical work on the effect of registration priority policies on students’ outcomes is very limited, evidence from other bodies of work indicates that students’ academic performance and chances of completing a degree tend to decline when they attend part-time or have interruptions in their academic history, both between high school graduation and college attendance and during college attendance (Adelman, 2005, 2006; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2012). Thus, students who are assigned a lower registration priority and, consequently, are unable to begin college in a timely manner, or are forced to attend part-time or to “stop out” of college due to the unavailability of needed courses, may suffer long-term consequences even if they eventually return to college full-time. Put simply, during times of impaction, registration priority policies will have a significant impact on students’ outcomes.

Interestingly, anecdotal reports (e.g., Yamamura, 2012) suggest that the overall demand placed on an impacted institution may *not* be ameliorated by registration priority policies. In particular, students who are excluded from the courses that they need by the combination of institutional impaction and low registration priority may be compelled to enroll in other, unnecessary courses simply to maintain their enrollment status (whether full-time or otherwise) for the purposes of financial aid or to improve their registration priority in subsequent terms. For example, about one quarter (23%) of *full-time* students accumulate educational loans while attending community college, and one seventh (14%) of *all* students in community colleges do so (Baum et al., 2011). For this significant minority of community college students, maintaining enrollment often is necessary to avoid being forced into early repayment of loans. One would expect that the need to maintain enrollment status would result in a cascade of course closures as students who have modest enrollment priority are forced into courses that they do not need, filling these classes prematurely and thereby preventing students who have even lower priority from obtaining seats in these courses.

Regardless, when used in response to institutional impaction, and when considered against the backdrop of the historical commitment of community colleges to access, registration priority policies are an especially volatile issue (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2009; Phelan, 2000). To the extent that particular student characteristics or behaviors are favored in a given registration priority policy framework, the framework picks “winners” and “losers” in terms of registering for key classes or not, beginning postsecondary education in a timely manner or delaying college, and reinforcing or discouraging commitment to the educational process (Bahr, 2012a).

Registration Priority Policies in the CCC System

Current Discourse on Registration Priority Policies

In a recent survey, the Pearson Foundation (2011) found that almost one out of three students in the CCC system reported difficulties with enrolling in the courses that they needed, while an even more troubling figure of one in two students was reported by Fain (2011). Nationally, one out of six students in community colleges reported such difficulties (Pearson Foundation, 2011). It seems clear that impaction has grown from an isolated phenomenon affecting just a handful of campuses into a system-wide problem in California. As cuts to state appropriations continue both in California and in other states, one may anticipate that this problem will escalate.

Given the level of impaction in the CCC system, it is not surprising that discussions about registration priority policies have taken center stage in California policy debates (e.g., Little Hoover Commission, 2012; Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges, 2012; Taylor, 2011), though this is not the first time. In 1993, in the midst of comparatively smaller budget cuts, the CCC Board of Governors recommended to the colleges a set of registration priority guidelines in order to align enrollment policies with dwindling system resources (Walters, 1994). It was recommended that first priority be granted to matriculated students and, among matriculated students, the recommended order of registration priority was continuing students, recent high school graduates, other new and returning students who did not hold a bachelor’s degree or a higher credential, and then new students with a bachelor’s degree or a higher credential.³ Priority then would be given to nonmatriculated students in the order of continuing students, new students, and then new students with a bachelor’s degree or a higher credential. Ultimately, though, the implementation of these recommendations was left to the discretion of individual colleges.

Since this first set of recommendations, registration priority policies have been implemented in various ways across the colleges of the CCC system, though the Board of Governors' initial effort to guide registration priority policies served as a catalyst for increased attention to the issue. In the ensuing two decades, legally mandated registration priority was granted to a number of student groups, including students who are enrolled in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), current and former members of the military, and (in 2011) current or former foster youth. The law also authorizes community colleges to provide registration priority to recipients of Disabled Student Services and Programs (DSPS), which, though not required, appears to have been adopted nearly universally across the CCC system.

In the last 2 years, the dramatic reductions in funding for the system have initiated an intensive reevaluation of registration priority policies. Case in point, in 2010 the California legislature mandated the formation of a Student Success Task Force "to examine specified best practices and models for accomplishing student success" in the community colleges (Community colleges: Student success and completion: Taskforce and plan of 2010, CA-SB 1143, 2010). Though the legislation made no mention of registration priority policies, the report issued by the Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges (2012), which acknowledged directly and repeatedly the financial situation of the CCC system, recommended the adoption by the Board of Governors of a mandatory and uniform set of registration priority policies for all community colleges:

The Community Colleges will adopt system-wide enrollment [registration] priorities that: (1) reflect the core mission of transfer, career technical education and basic skills development; (2) encourage students to identify their educational objective and follow a prescribed path most likely to lead to success; (3) ensure access and the opportunity for success for new students; and (4) incentivize students to make progress toward their educational goal (p. 33).

Though the Task Force provided few operational definitions, the registration priority scheme recommended for adoption provides specific advantages to: (a) continuing students who are in good academic standing and making progress toward a credential, transfer to a 4-year institution, or a demonstrable "career advancement objective"; (b) first-time students who participate in matriculation; and (c) students who enroll in requisite remedial coursework in their 1st year of attendance. In turn, the scheme specifically disadvantages students who: (a) do not declare a program of study by the end of their third semester or do not follow their educational plan, (b) accumulate more than 100 course credits; or (c) are placed on academic probation or "progress probation" for two consecutive terms (p. 33).

The Task Force report is informative about the direction of policy discourse concerning registration priority in at least two ways. First, the compulsory language used by the Task Force may be contrasted with the conciliatory language of Walters' (1994) "suggested" guidelines for assigning registration priority nearly two decades earlier (p. 23), which were intended to "allow maximum flexibility for [community college] districts" (p. 22). State-mandated registration priority policies would represent an important departure from the freedom that community colleges historically have had to adopt policies that best serve their respective local communities.

More importantly, however, Walters' discussion of the registration priority guidelines clearly was set in the context of maximizing access to postsecondary education, which is a philosophical cornerstone of community colleges nationwide and a cornerstone of California's *Master Plan for Higher Education* in particular.

This mission [of the California Community Colleges] is to provide Californians access to quality programs in transfer and career education and in the mastery of basic skills and in English as a second language. *Access to these programs is to be provided to all California residents who have the capacity and motivation to benefit from such programs* (Walters, 1994, pp. 22-23, italics added).

This foundational tenet was reaffirmed in the recently updated report on community college enrollment management by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2009).

In contrast, the report of the Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges (2012) reframed registration priority policies in the comparatively recent language of the "student success agenda" for community colleges (e.g., Gould, 2010), recommending the adoption of registration priority policies "that encourage students to follow and make progress along delineated educational pathways that are most likely to lead to completion of a certificate, degree, transfer, or career advancement goal" (p. 32). Further, the report argued that "altering enrollment [registration] prioritization is an efficient way of encouraging successful student behaviors and ensuring that we are rationing classes to provide more students with the opportunity to succeed" (p. 33).

While seemingly a common-sense proposition, the language of the student success agenda implies a fairly narrow definition of success, especially as it pertains to community colleges and other broad-access institutions (American Federation of Teachers—Higher Education, 2011; Mullin, 2012). In particular, the student success agenda is focused primarily on credential completion through conventional pathways. It excludes, for example, the nearly one third

of community college students who use the community college to take one or two courses, succeed in these courses at a rate that approaches 100%, and then depart from the community college, nearly always without a credential and without transferring to a 4-year institution (Bahr, 2010, 2011). Nevertheless, despite what appears to be a significant shift in the focus of community colleges in California, and despite a high level of contention among stakeholders about the recommendations (e.g., Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2011; Forum, 2012), the recommendations of the Task Force were approved unanimously by the Board of Governors (Abdollah, 2012; Rivera, 2012).

Though the recommendations of the Task Force have been approved and are scheduled to take effect in 2014, the precise form of their implementation remains to be determined (Rivera, 2012). Undoubtedly, implementation will be influenced by the other powerful voices in this discussion. Among these, while the work of the Task Force was underway, the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) issued a brief arguing that the state should enact uniform registration priority policies in the community colleges that "maximize access for the state's highest-priority students" (Taylor, 2011, p. 3). Similar to the report of the Task Force, the LAO's recommendations focused on prioritizing the course enrollments of students who are seeking to transfer, to earn a credential, to acquire job skills, or to learn English. The LAO suggested that students' use of matriculation services should be a primary criterion for determining registration priority. Further, the brief recommended a cap on the number of state subsidized credits that a student may earn, as well as a cap on the number of times that certain courses may be repeated with state subsidization.

Shortly after the release of the Task Force report, the Little Hoover Commission (2012)—an independent state oversight agency—produced a report assessing the condition of the CCC system. The report contended that the colleges' current array of registration priority policies is among the primary causes (along with budget cuts) of the perceived low rate of success among community college students, where "success" is defined in terms of the completion of credentials, transfer, and advancement of basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. In fact, the report cast the breadth of community colleges' three-fold mission—typically described as transfer, workforce development, and community education (Bahr, 2013a)—as evidence of "mission creep" (p. 7), a phrase reserved in recent years to describe contemporary efforts to develop a community college baccalaureate degree (Longanecker, 2008). Further, the report advocated directly for a reexamination of the foundational tenet of open access: "California must re-examine the notion of 'open access' and focus on providing access to educational opportunities at the

community colleges, but not necessarily to opportunities to learn simply for the sake of learning” (p. 35). Accordingly, the report recommended a set of uniform registration priority policies that favor matriculating students and those students who show clear progress toward transferring, goals in career and technical education, or improving basic skills, as well as caps on state subsidized credits and course repetition.

Clearly, significant changes are occurring in the CCC system, and registration priority policies are central to these changes. The critical question now is not *whether* significant limitations should be placed on community colleges’ open-access foundation via registration priority policies. Rather, policymakers and administrators are struggling with the form and implementation of these changes—*how* registration priority policies should be revised and enacted. Yet, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Bahr, 2012a; Spurling, 2000), there is at present very little empirical research to inform the revision of these policies. Even more startling, there is only limited documentation of current registration priority policies against which proposed and enacted changes may be compared, which is a problem that we seek to rectify here.

Current Registration Priority Policies

To gain a better understanding of how community colleges currently are structuring registration priority policies, we conducted a content analysis of the websites, catalogs, and course scheduling documents of the 112 colleges in the CCC system. Although used infrequently in higher education research, content analysis is a valuable technique for summarizing and interpreting themes and patterns in written material (Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Krippendorff, 2004).

Our execution of the technique relied on a multistage process over a 9-month period ending in March of 2012. First, we conducted a preliminary search of the aforementioned documents to (a) identify words and phrases that the colleges use to describe their registration prioritization policies, (b) identify the groups of students who commonly receive registration priority, and (c) determine how colleges describe and define the identified groups of students. Based on this initial search, we developed a set of inductively reasoned operational definitions of key concepts in this study, including the concept of *registration priority* itself as practiced by the colleges. We defined *registration priority* as the hierarchy of temporal advantage in course registration appointments prior to open registration, granted selectively to specific groups of students by a college. We also created a coding scheme to account for the presence of a registration priority system at a college and the criteria used by the college to determine the assignment of registration priority to

particular groups. We then revisited the documents for each college, systematically recording the order in which groups of students are assigned registration priority, the criteria used by colleges to define relevant groups of students, and any nuances in the registration priority assignment process. Finally, to maximize reliability, coded data were examined by a second member of the research team to ascertain consistency between the information contained in the documents and our operational definitions of terms. Ultimately, we were able to collect data on the registration priority policies of 110 of the 112 colleges.

Importantly, while this approach to data collection certainly yields useful information about the registration priority policies of individual colleges, it also has a significant limitation in that the documents that we examined may not capture fully all of the details of registration priority policies implemented by the colleges. In addition to the possibility of any codified nuances to a college's registration priority policies that are not conveyed on the website or other web-available documents (e.g., college catalog, course schedule), our approach will reveal neither furtive and undocumented nuances that express aspects of the college's "unwritten" institutional culture nor exceptions to formal policies obtained through informal student appeals processes. Data on matters of this sort could be obtained through ethnographic methods, and we recommend the use of such methods in future research on this topic. Still, our efforts constitute a critical advancement in a field of inquiry that is marked by a scarcity of empirical work. Moreover, our focus of web-available information is, itself, important because websites are an essential communication tool between the college and the students, and an examination of colleges' websites and web-available documents sheds light on the accessibility of information concerning institutional policies that influence students' progress and eventual attainment (Van Noy, Weiss, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2012).

In addition, note that we excluded from our data collection process any information about the registration priority of groups of students who are mandated to receive registration priority or that receive registration priority universally. As outlined earlier, these students include current and former members of the military, students enrolled in EOPS, current and former foster youth, and participants in DSPS, all of whom typically receive the highest level of registration priority. In effect, the receipt of registration priority by these groups is a constant or near-constant across the colleges of the CCC system and, therefore, not of interest here.

Our findings indicate that registration priority policies vary significantly across the colleges of the CCC system, though a number of commonalities are evident. Four groups of students frequently receive some degree of

registration priority, including continuing students, new students, returning students, and students in special programs or categories. In the sections that follow, we discuss common features of the treatment of these student groups in the colleges' registration priority policies.

Continuing Students

The vast majority of colleges (93.6%; 103 of 110) award continuing students—students attending in consecutive semesters—a high level of registration priority, often second only to the legally mandated groups. Of the colleges that award registration priority to continuing students, just over one third (38.8%; 40 of 103) treat continuing students as a single group, awarding the same level of registration priority regardless of how long the student has continued in the college, or dividing continuing students into strata based on some essentially random criterion. For example, Woodland Community College uses the last four digits of students' social security numbers to distribute registration appointments among continuing students. However, the majority of colleges (61.2%; 63 of 103) divide continuing students into strata based on credit accumulation, participation in matriculation, academic performance, or some combination of these and other criteria, with corresponding higher or lower registration priority relative to other continuing students.

Credit accumulation, which refers to the number of course credit hours a student has completed at a community college, is the most common criterion used by colleges to determine relative registration priority among continuing students, employed by 77.8% of the colleges that divide continuing students into strata (49 of 63). For example, students at Allan Hancock College who have completed 50 or more credits are able to register a day earlier than students who have completed 30 to 49.5 credits, two days earlier than students who have completed 12 to 29.5 credits, and three days earlier than students who have completed one to 11.5 credits. Of the colleges that use credit accumulation to stratify continuing students, 59.2% (29 of 49) use credit accumulation as the sole determinant of a continuing student's registration priority, while the remaining 40.8% (20 of 49) use credit accumulation in conjunction with other factors (e.g., matriculation, grade point average).

Credit accumulation also may affect students' registration priority adversely. Among colleges that divide students into strata based on credit accumulation, 57.1% (28 of 49) penalize students who exceed a specified credit threshold, typically between 80 and 110 credits. For example, students at College of the Canyons are penalized for accumulating 100 or more credits by being placed in the *lowest* registration priority group among continuing

students, which includes continuing students who have accumulated up to 14.9 credits. Students at Crafton Hills College who reach or exceed 91 credits are placed in the same low registration priority groups as returning students (defined at this college as students who have taken a break of more than 2 years) and students who already have earned a bachelor's degree. In contrast, there is no penalty associated with accumulating an unusually large number of credits at Allan Hancock College.

Either alone or in combination with other criteria, 27.0% of the colleges that stratify continuing students (17 of 63) use students' completion of the steps of matriculation process as a criterion, which includes assessment, counseling, orientation, and development of a student education plan. Among these, 47.1% (8 of 17) use matriculation in addition to credit accumulation. Said another way, among colleges that use credit accumulation to determine a continuing student's registration priority, 16.3% (8 of 49) use completion of the steps of matriculation as a secondary filter.

Moreover, among colleges that consider completion of the matriculation process in determining continuing students' registration priority, more than half (58.8%; 10 of 17) ranked continuing students by the number of matriculation steps that they have completed. For example, students at Antelope Valley College who have completed all four of the matriculation components and are in their last semester of attendance prior to graduating receive first registration priority. Each successive priority group is defined by the number of matriculation components completed, and, within each of these ranks, students are further subdivided by credit accumulation. Interestingly, at least one institution, Golden Coast College, explicitly states that continuing students who refuse matriculation services will *not* receive priority registration.

A small number of colleges consider indicators of academic performance in the assignment of registration priority among continuing students. For example, 15.9% of the colleges that stratify continuing students (10 of 63) bestow first priority on students who are entering their last semester prior to graduation, as does Antelope Valley College mentioned earlier. In addition, 11.1% of the colleges (7 of 63) use grade point average as a criterion.

New Students

While nearly all of the colleges provided clear information about the assignment of registration priority among continuing students, information about the registration priority of new students often was less clear or not available. In total, we were able to ascertain the registration priority policies concerning new students at 78 of the colleges. Of these, two thirds (66.7%; 52 of 78) offer some level of registration priority to new students who meet selected

criteria, though this priority often is lower than that provided to continuing students. In addition, slightly less than half (48.7%; 38 of 78) treat new and returning students similarly with respect to the assignment of registration priority, and just under half of these (47.4%; 18 of 38) offer some level of registration priority, though usually minimal.

While credit accumulation is the most common criterion used to stratify continuing students, completion of the steps of matriculation is the criterion most colleges use to determine registration priority for new students. In fact, 75.0% of colleges that explicitly give registration priority to some new students (39 of 52) use matriculation as a criterion. However, the number and type of matriculation steps that colleges require new students to complete in order to receive registration priority varies. For example, Folsom Lake College assigns registration priority to new students who complete three of the four steps of matriculation. In contrast, Los Angeles City College offers registration priority to new students who attend an orientation session. Another approach, used by the College of the Desert, gives priority to new students who have fully matriculated, while new students who have not completed all necessary matriculation steps may enroll only after attending an orientation session.

In addition, although colleges' use of this criterion was not always clear, some colleges offer registration priority to new students who are recent graduates of a local high school, such as Barstow Community College. Pierce College offers registration priority to participants in its early admissions program for graduating high school seniors—a benefit of the program that the college advertises prominently. A final example is the “Student Orientation, Assessment, and (Priority) Registration” (SOAR) program of the Coast Community College District. SOAR admissions counselors visit local high schools to assist seniors in navigating the college enrollment process, and participants who choose to enroll in a district community college receive registration priority.

Returning Students

Similar to new students, clear information about the treatment of returning students in the colleges' registration priority policies was not always available. We were able to ascertain the policies concerning returning students at 74 of the colleges. Of these, 56.8% (42 of 74) offer some level of registration priority to returning students, often at or below the level provided to new students. Quite different from new students, however, only 16.7% of these colleges (7 of 42) explicitly based registration priority assignment on matriculation status.

Perhaps the more interesting aspect of the treatment of returning students is the degree of variation across the colleges in what constitutes “returning” status. For example, Crafton Hills College defines “returning” as an absence from the college of more than 2 years—an expansive definition of a returning student. In contrast, students who did not attend Cerritos College during the previous semester must apply for readmittance in order to register for classes and are not eligible for registration priority until the subsequent semester. At the College of the Desert, students who have not attended for at least two semesters are asked to follow the same enrollment steps required of new students and do not receive registration priority.

Special Programs and Categories

Just over two thirds of the colleges (68.2%; 75 of 110) offer registration priority to participants in an array of special programs, frequently placing participants in the first or second rank of registration priority along with the legally mandated groups and the highest ranked continuing students. Of these, 46.7% of colleges (35 of 75) include only one special program or category in their registration priority policy, while the remaining 53.3% (40 of 75) prioritize two or more special programs or categories.

Although the special programs and categories that afford registration priority to participants vary widely across the colleges, several commonalities emerged. Colleges that award registration priority to students in a special program or category most often awarded registration priority to student athletes (40.0%; 30 of 75), TRIO⁴ program participants (28.0%; 21 of 75), honors students (28.0%; 21 of 75), student government members (13.3%; 10 of 75), and participants in CalWorks (29.3%; 22 of 75) which is California’s welfare-to-work program.

One third of colleges (33.3%; 25 of 75) offer registration priority to students in one or more locally determined programs or categories not mentioned above. For example, College of the Desert offers registration priority to participants in its Academic Counseling & Services program (ACES), a graduation and transfer support program for first-generation, low-income students at the college. Los Angeles Valley College offers registration priority to participants in its Transfer Alliance Program, a program focused on first-time students who are seeking to transfer to a 4-year institution. Diablo Valley College and Contra Costa College offer registration priority to DSPS note-takers, while Cuesta College and Taft College offer registration priority to college staff and faculty. In addition, it is not uncommon for registration priority to be offered to students in particular programs of study, such as nursing students at Cuesta College. These examples illustrate the range of

variation in the programs and categories that are favored in the colleges' registration priority policies and the high degree of autonomy that the colleges have exercised in tailoring their policies to the needs of their local communities.

Discussion

California provides a useful and informative case through which to examine the effects on community colleges of the "perfect storm" created by plummeting higher education budgets and skyrocketing demand for enrollment. While the California legislature has increased what passes for community college tuition in that state, enrollment growth still is sorely underfunded. The result is widespread institutional impaction and rationing of access to coursework, leaving few options but to control student access through registration priority policies.

Although there is remarkably little empirical work on registration priority policies in community colleges, there also is little doubt that these policies will have serious consequences for the open-access foundation and comprehensive mission of community colleges (Bahr, 2012a). As noted earlier, in a time of impaction and "seat rationing," registration priority policies effectively pick "winners" and "losers" in terms of access to postsecondary education. Given the centrality of community colleges to the promise of equal opportunity in the United States (Hagedorn, 2010), particularly for underrepresented, historically disadvantaged, and nontraditional groups, changes to community college registration priority policies must be considered and deliberated carefully and driven by the same empirically based "culture of inquiry" that has been advocated for other aspects of institutional policy and practice that influence students' progress and achievement (e.g., Dowd, 2005).

In this article, we situated the current policy discourse on community college registration priority policies in California in a larger policy context and in a body of literature on enrollment management. We also initiated a line of inquiry into this area by documenting the policies of 110 (of 112) colleges in the CCC system for which information was available. That is, we established a policy baseline—the policies as they exist in the present, prior to what appear to be significant and large-scale impending changes.

Our study revealed both similarities and differences in registration priority policies across colleges. While continuing students receive high registration priority almost universally, the criteria used to allocate relative registration priority among continuing studies vary greatly across the colleges. New and returning students receive a modest level of registration priority about as often as not. New students typically are required to complete aspects of the

matriculation process in order to receive any registration priority, but returning students, the definition of which varies across the colleges, often are not held to the same standard. Finally, the majority of colleges provide a high level of registration priority to students in selected programs and categories, but variation in favored programs across the colleges is substantial. Even the most common category—athletes, who receive registration priority in 40% of colleges that provide registration priority to students in any special program or category—is not incorporated into the registration priority policies of a majority of the colleges. Thus, the policies of the colleges appear similar when viewed from a distance but, on closer examination, are found to be highly variable, which underscores the urgency of the current debate concerning these policies.

Though our analysis provides important baseline information about registration priority policies, much remains to be done. As noted earlier, research on the impact of various registration priority schemes on students' outcomes is very limited. In fact, we were able to identify only two studies that address the topic directly (Bahr, 2012a; Spurling, 2000). In the more recent of these, Bahr (2012a) used data from the CCC system to develop an equation-based registration priority scheme built around maximizing the completion of community college credentials (e.g., associate degrees, certificates) and upward transfer to 4-year institutions. He then simulated the impact of this scheme on the distribution of demographic characteristics in the system under a worst-case impactation scenario, comparing it with a set of ideal typical registration policies designed to emulate existing policies. In the other study, Spurling (2000) used data from the City College of San Francisco to examine the influence of being denied access to a course that has reached capacity on students' likelihood of attempting a similar course in the future. In addition to these two studies, there is a small body of work on the influence of registration timing on students' outcomes (e.g., Hale & Bray, 2011; Smith, Street, & Olivarez, 2002), but this work generally does not distinguish the causes of differences in registration timing, making it of limited value. For example, it typically is not clear in these studies if students registered late because they were assigned a low registration priority or as a result of personal circumstances. Thus, given the dearth of literature, the field of potential inquiry on the influence of registration priority policies on students is extraordinarily broad.

In that regard, we recommend four important directions for future research. First and perhaps most pressing, we need research on the short- and long-term effects of the varied registration priority schemes on what Bahr (2012a) describes as the “face” of the community college system—the distribution of sex, race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and other student characteristics. This is a particularly important issue because community colleges are

the portal to higher education for a large fraction of the population, and substantial changes in who is able to pass through that portal will have consequences for the makeup of other sectors of higher education, the workforce, and, likely, the middle class. Framed another way, we must ask who “wins” and who “loses” under the myriad potential registration priority schemes, what alternatives are available to those who lose, and what are the larger implications of these losses for the workforce and society? For example, the limited evidence presented to date suggests that registration priority schemes that favor enrollment behaviors typically associated with the conventional academic goals of upward transfer and associate’s degree completion (e.g., uninterrupted enrollment, high credit accumulation) tend to disadvantage Black and Hispanic students, students of nontraditional age (i.e., older students), and, to a lesser extent, male students (Bahr, 2012a).

To help achieve this research goal, we recommend that both state systems offices (in states that maintain such offices) and individual colleges begin to collect data on students’ assigned registration priority in each term. This would be a relatively simple recommendation to implement because most state systems offices and virtually all colleges already maintain extensive student unit record data on course enrollments, financial aid, credential awards, and the like. Adding one element to these databases to document students’ assigned registration priority in each term would make it possible to evaluate the efficacy of various registration priority schemes and to analyze the consequences of differential registration priority on students’ academic progress and attainment.

Second, an important complication to registration priority policies that also requires research concerns student swirl, particularly lateral transfer. Lateral transfer refers to student movement between community colleges (Bahr, 2009). Bahr (2012b) demonstrated that 30% of first-time community college students in California who remain in the system for at least two semesters transfer laterally at least once. Interestingly, the evidence suggests that lateral transfer may represent an educationally strategic move for at least some students (Bahr, 2012b). One may expect that institutional impaction will increase the strategic value of lateral transfers as students seek to maintain progress toward their respective goals through what McCormick (2003) described as “consolidated enrollment” (i.e., piecing together degree programs or other academic objectives from the course offerings of a variety of colleges).

However, registration priority policies, even those that are mandated at the state level, are fundamentally college-centric. That is, a student’s status as a continuing, new, or returning student, and status as a participant in many advantaged programs or categories (e.g., honors programs, transfer acceleration programs), are determined at the level of the individual college.

Consequently, a continuing student who transfers laterally may be deemed a new or returning student and may lose special program/category status, resulting in a reduction or loss of any course enrollment advantage. Thus, in addition to any impact of impending changes in registration priority policies on the “face” of higher education, the workforce, and the middle class, there may be unintended consequences of these changes for the increasingly common and seemingly strategic patterns of interinstitutional mobility among students.

To address this issue, we recommend that community colleges establish interinstitutional agreements that make registration priority portable from one college to another. Such agreements would be especially valuable in urban areas where multiple community colleges are located within reasonable driving distance. The challenge, of course, will be reconciling registration priority schemes that differ across colleges. Here, one finds the potential for significant value in a statewide, mandated registration priority scheme that is uniform across the colleges, as is being implemented in California. However, even California’s recently adopted scheme provides some discretion to the colleges, which will result in a degree of institutional variability that can be addressed only through interinstitutional agreements.

A third important line of inquiry concerns students’ use of the registration priority granted to them by the college. Although not a specific focus of our research, we found that the ready availability and comprehensibility of information about registration priority policies varied substantially across the colleges in our study. One would expect that registration priority associated with credit accumulation—a common determinant of continuing students’ priority—would be automatic in most colleges, though it remains to be determined how well-integrated are the student data systems and registration priority assignment systems used by colleges and how accurately students are assigned to registration priority ranks given the often complicated course taking and enrollment patterns exhibited by community college students (see, e.g., the discussion by Ewell, 2010, of the challenges concerning data collection and use in community colleges).

However, additional common criteria used to determine registration priority, such as entering the last semester prior to graduation or participating in the several components of matriculation, clearly require students both to understand the registration priority scheme and to act in a timely manner to secure priority. Yet, the assumption that community college students, the majority of whom do not fit the “traditional” college student profile, are knowledgeable about and prepared to navigate with little assistance the administrative and bureaucratic structures of higher education has been demonstrated to be both false and an important obstacle to students’

progress and attainment (Bahr, 2013b; Moore & Shulock, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Thus, it will be important in future research to consider both the structural consequences of registration priority policies, the means by which these policies are communicated to students, and the manner in which the policies are understood and utilized by students.

In the near-term, it is imperative that colleges implement strategies to communicate both their registration priority policies and the avenues by which students may take advantage of these policies. An effective communication strategy would encompass information on the college's website, student interaction with admissions, academic advising, and financial aid services staff, modules on registration priority in students orientation sessions and student success courses, in-class presentations by faculty, notification on social media websites, and potentially other vehicles of communication as well. One would expect that direct communication from faculty to students would be a particularly important component of the overall communication strategy around registration priority policies, but the heavy reliance by community colleges on part-time faculty, who often are marginalized within the institution, may hinder the implementation of this component (Levin, 2013).

In addition, in this period of significant institutional impaction, states and colleges should be seeking to improve processes for helping students find and enroll in alternative courses when first-choice courses already are full. At present, though course registration has been largely computerized, students must depend primarily on course catalogs (or similar web-based versions of catalog information) to identify necessary courses as they navigate through program requirements. A comparatively simple "fix" for this problem is to build on existing course registration systems to match students' reported academic objectives with open courses, providing a list of recommended second-choice or third-choice courses to students whose first-choice courses are full. In the longer term, one would hope that such systems could evolve into intelligent, automated, "fuzzy logic" advising about course selection, whereby students who are preparing to register for courses are provided with a list of open courses, course meeting times/days, and the like, that are matched to their reported academic objectives, the academic objectives that they *appear* to be pursuing based on past course enrollments, their reported career objectives, and their reported availability to attend classes (e.g., the maximum number of credits that the student believes he/she can handle in a given term, the days of the week and the times of day that the student is available to attend class). Such intelligent systems already are widely used in various forms in the private sector to match consumers' prior purchasing habits and reported current needs with potential products of interest.

Finally, from a broader perspective, we encourage consideration and inquiry into the value judgments that are implicit to the various registration priority schemes, including those recently proposed in California. For decades, the values of access and opportunity have dominated discourse on community colleges. Recently, the values espoused in this discourse have begun to shift from access and opportunity to fiscal responsibility and student success, the latter of which perhaps is more accurately described as “student credential completion.” Further, it appears that much of the debate about the changes in registration priority policies in California has less to do with the policies themselves than it does with the values that underlie those policies. While we do not advocate a particular set of values, clearly it will be important going forward for the values associated with particular registration priority policies to be clearly articulated, both philosophically and empirically, so that decisions about the future of community colleges may be circumspect and informed.

As underlying values are contemplated, states and colleges must consider the many ways in which students use the community college for objectives other than a credential or transfer to a 4-year institution. One category of such use that is of particular interest might be described best as the “well-worn noncompleting pathways”—seemingly organized and rational course-taking patterns that often do not result in a credential and that frequently are associated with career and technical education fields (Bahr, 2010). At present, we do not have a good grasp of the nature of these pathways or the labor market returns associated with these pathways, and it would be shortsighted without careful analysis and evaluation to place less intrinsic value on this type of use simply because it tends not to result in the award of a credential.

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1. Though the CCC system officially does not collect “tuition” for in-state students, the basic per-credit enrollment fee that is paid by community college students in California serves essentially the same role (Murphy, 2004). In addition, community colleges in California have a degree of control over some campus-specific

- fees, such as fees for health services, student centers, and the like (Shulock & Moore, 2007; Walters, 1994).
2. Though only occasionally mentioned as an SEM strategy in the literature, the policy of limiting or eliminating students' ability to enroll in courses after instruction has begun (Walters, 1994) is related tangentially to the practice of limiting enrollment through registration prioritization. However, one would expect that this strategy would influence overall demand for courses only in the short term.
 3. The California Seymour-Campbell Matriculation Act of 1986 requires community colleges to provide matriculation services to students, including assessment, counseling, orientation, and the like, though some argue that state funding for matriculation services never has been adequate, and these services were further denuded by a 52% budget cut in 2009-2010 (Student Success Task Force of the California Community Colleges, 2012).
 4. TRIO is comprised of eight federally funded programs that are designed to strengthen the educational pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate for low-income, disabled, or first-generation college students.

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