

Opinion: Community colleges need to help themselves

By Neil Kreisel and Vanessa L. Patterson, Chronicle of Higher Education

The country's community colleges are at great risk of becoming "separate but unequal institutions in the higher-education landscape," according to a report issued recently by the Century Foundation. This is hardly news to those of us in the world of community colleges. And yet we – particularly those of us with fund-raising responsibilities – could be doing so much more than we are to help close the parity gap and help our own institutions thrive.

Nearly one-half of students in higher education attend community colleges, representing a diverse ensemble who will eventually be among the leaders in such critical fields as science, engineering, education, and health care. Historically modeled as a training ground for students to compete for local jobs, these colleges are now gateways to a world of wider opportunity, offering programs to prepare students for career success and lifelong learning, and smoothing pathways to four-year universities.

But this transformation is a struggle that will not be won without an increase in philanthropy for education, now dominated by four-year institutions. For each dollar given to a four-year college, only a cent or two goes to support community colleges. The Century Foundation's study found that the average benefit from private and group donations, grants, investment returns, endowment income, and the like per full-time student to private research institutions was \$46,342, compared with \$372 for community colleges.

Those of us in the business of community colleges clearly see

that the amount of private support affects how effective a college can be with programs that focus students on career paths and educational preparedness. Successful colleges start programs in collaboration with local high schools, introducing students to a wealth of career fields, to the importance of liberal-arts education, to financial and academic support systems within the community, to internships, and to the processes of applications and interviews.

They also work with other community colleges to improve access to educational programs and to reach agreements with four-year colleges. Those agreements ease the transfer process, long a major obstacle to furthering education at two-year institutions. Here at Santa Barbara City College, establishing such agreements with the California State University system's 23 campuses is a top priority.

This spring, Santa Barbara and Walla Walla Community College, in Washington State, were awarded the Aspen Institute's 2013 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. As proud as we are of that, we are frustrated by the fact that a lack of private philanthropy continues to stifle program development and expansion at community colleges. And we must do much more to change that.

To begin with, community colleges need to develop relations with alumni, who often identify with the four-year college from which they earned a degree. A recent survey by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education showed that an average of one-half of one percent of alumni contributed to a community college in the 2012 fiscal year. The comparable number for four-year universities nationwide is 13 percent.

But that sad fact goes hand in hand with this one: Fewer than 60 percent of survey respondents said their community college maintained an annual operating budget for alumni relations. Among those institutions that specified an alumni-relations budget, the average annual amount was a paltry \$23,611. To

develop an alumni giving program – the cornerstone of marketing campaigns – community colleges need a healthy revenue flow for staff, technology, and donor-program development. In turn, increased donor dollars will improve existing academic programs and help support efforts to help students succeed.

Meanwhile, we are seeing encouraging signs from institutional philanthropies. The Bernard Osher Foundation, among others, has provided significant grants. Federal grant programs, too, are expanding opportunities for the low-income and minority students who attend community colleges, many of whom are the first in their family to go to college, and many of whom enroll at remediation levels.

Fund raisers at all colleges are seeing donations rise, according to a survey released in January by the council. The survey showed that giving increased by 5.5 percent last year, with development officials predicting a 5.8 percent increase in donations in 2013.

Community colleges have some reason for optimism: Fund raisers on those campuses reported a 7 percent gain in giving in 2012 and predicted growth of 6.8 percent this year. But that's just not enough.

The Foundation for Santa Barbara City College oversees \$45-million worth of net assets, which is well above those of most community-college foundations, but still well below the almost-\$500-million average endowment of four-year colleges. That figure, of course is skewed by the endowments of Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and other wealthy institutions, but it nonetheless illustrates the lack of parity when it comes to both alumni and institutional giving.

As champions of our beloved community colleges, fund raisers must stand up for the millions of students depending on us to keep the doors of opportunity open for them. The fund

disparity threatens the crucial role that community colleges play in our education system.

It also is in direct conflict with the doctrine that has governed this nation's education policies for decades. The President's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy declared in 1947 that "tuition-free education should be available in public institutions to all youth for the traditional freshman and sophomore years or for the traditional two-year junior college course. ... Community colleges probably will have to carry a large part of the responsibility for expanding opportunities in higher education." Indeed, we do.

At California's community colleges, tuition has nearly doubled over the past two years, from \$26 a unit in 2009-10 to \$46 a unit in 2013.

We must do so much better than we are to make an affordable, high-quality two-year-college education available to all. With equitable philanthropic support, we will.

Neil Kreisel is president of the Board of Directors of the Foundation for Santa Barbara City College, and Vanessa L. Patterson is executive director of the foundation.