

OUR OPINION

Should VVC offer four-year degrees?

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There are 112 community colleges in California, including, of course, Victor Valley College, which has just emerged from accreditation probation. None of the 112 offers a four-year course culminating in a baccalaureate degree.

That could change if a bill offered by state Sen. Marty Block of San Diego makes it through the Legislature and gets a stamp of approval from Gov. Jerry Brown.

The bill does not, however, confer blanket authority on all the state's community colleges to offer such degrees. It authorizes an eight-year pilot program for "some" community colleges, but does not specify which. It also seems to protect major California schools (the University of California for one) from competition for students seeking four-year degrees. This is politically generated, we suppose, which makes us view the program with suspicion.

Reducing college costs?

It also seems to be at least a stab at bringing down the cost of a college education in California. But it doesn't address the root causes of college costs. One of those root causes are the college subsidies offered by government and/or charitable foundations. When government offers low cost student loans, or forgives loans already made but not yet paid (an idea contained in a recent White House proposal) the first people to take advantage of such offers are college bean counters. They follow such programs closely, and design their fees accordingly. When scholarships reduce student costs, or when loans do the same, the colleges almost in lock step increase their fees and tuition charges to absorb the extra money. So the scholarships and loans are eaten up by the colleges, which are in the end the only ones to benefit from that extra money.

Sen. Block is a Democrat, which obviously gives the bill a leg up regarding its chances of passage. It also apparently bows to the leftdominated (and of course, union dominated) academic community in that it's written so as to protect California's four-year public schools.

The bill has merit

Still, we think Sen. Block is to be commended for bringing the idea before the public. It has merit for more than just the possibility it might reduce college costs. For instance, a California Community Colleges study group found recently to meet the projected workforce demand for nurses by 2025, California would have to increase the number of bachelor's degrees it awards by 40 percent. That seems like a natural for VVC, which already has a strong two-year nursing course. Boosting it to baccalaureate status would not only save the nursing course candidates from having to travel down the hill to complete their four years (that's a big saving in time and money immediately) but might well attract more candidates, thus meeting the demand mentioned in the study.

Other problems

There are other problems. One of the Victor Valley residents we asked about the idea read the bill, and thought that it might lead to a "turf war" between the community colleges and the University of California/California State University system. Additionally, though it could attract more university-level professors to VVC. That in itself could significantly affect VVC's internal costs, and thus inevitably boost tuition costs — which is one of the principle motivations for Sen. Block's introduction of the bill.

On the other hand, it could boost the quality of the VVC teaching staff, and thus attract more students to the school.

This is obviously a proposal that needs more attention, in particular more public debate. If in the end all it does is add to the power of the teachers union conglomerate in California, we're opposed. The power and influence of those unions on California government already far exceeds their usefulness, and is in our view the basic cause of California's declining attractiveness as a place to live and work.

Steve Williams