

# ANTELOPE VALLEY PRESS

## EDITORIAL

### **Let's stabilize community college funding**

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California's community colleges inarguably contribute to the state in multiple ways and at reasonable cost.

More than 2.5 million students from diverse backgrounds get a chance at higher learning and life improvement. The state's economy benefits from a better educated, better quality work force (e.g., more than 63,000 students earned associate degrees and vocational/occupational certificates in 2005-06 alone). Experts say California needs 3.2 million new college educated workers – nurses, teachers, engineers, and others - to keep our competitive edge, and community colleges help supply that need.

Of course, like every other worthwhile public activity, community colleges cost money.

Did you know that Golden State funding of community colleges falls short of the national average of \$10,000? Or that California community colleges receive far less funding (\$4,559 per student) than the Cal State system (\$10,623) or the University of California system (\$19,883)?

That means, for example, that part-timers are overused (and sometimes underpaid) as faculty members. Class sizes are larger (will more than 30 students per class in some cases), and the number of sections of even required classes is limited. Student services such as counseling, matriculation assistance and tutoring suffer.

That's where Proposition 92 – the California Community College Initiative – scheduled for the February ballot, comes in. The initiative would stabilize funding streams for community colleges, based on their growth.

Community college funding currently is based on growth in enrollment in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. But while demand for community-college opportunities is on the rise – the so-called “baby boomer echo” is now massing at college doors – K-12 schools are actually declining in enrollment.

The formulation as it stands means many students may be denied community college opportunities just when the need is greater than ever.

The Community College Initiative decouples community college funding from the K-12 model – funding would instead be tied to the actual college age population - and establishes minimum annual funding levels for institutions such as our own Antelope Valley College.

It's a more reasonable formulation – a modest but critical reform.

Proposition 92 also cuts community college fees to \$15 per unit and links future increases to the cost of living. Reducing fees gives more Californians a chance to go to college. (Did you know that in 2004, when community college fees jumped to \$26 per unit, 305,000 fewer students enrolled than were projected – whereas the recent per-unit reduction to \$20 boosted system-wide enrollment by 6 %?)

Prop. 92 also establishes an independent system of public community college districts and a board of governors.

And here's a bit of really good news : Prop. 92 is not a bond. Nor does it raise taxes. It simply calculates the minimum community college funding guarantee based on actual community college growth – much like what Prop. 98, several years ago, did for public schools.

Under the Community College Initiative, our own Antelope Valley College expects to receive some \$4 million more by the 2009-10 year than it would under the current funding formulation. (And every little bit helps : In case you haven't noticed, north Los Angeles County has had one of the region's fastest growing populations for years and will continue to experience same for the foreseeable future.)

The Valley Press does not support cavalier tinkering with the state's constitution, especially for tangential benefits, and Prop. 92 is a constitutional amendment. Nor are we amused with set-in-stone set-asides that produce dubious or decreasing returns by pinching other legitimate needs (we don't think, for example, that California always gets all the bang it should for its public school buck).

But Prop. 92 is a good idea – a reasonable and realistic adjustment in the way California funds community colleges. We support its passage come February.