

TIMES EDITORIAL

Chance to aid colleges

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CALIFORNIA'S COMMUNITY colleges could be getting some much-needed additional revenue. A measure has qualified for the Feb. 5, 2008, presidential primary ballot that would increase funding by hundreds of millions of dollars and cut student fees from \$20 per unit to \$15 per unit.

Future fee increases would be limited to 10 percent or the percentage increase in Californians' income, whichever is lowest.

Where the extra revenue would come from is uncertain, but supporters of the measure say it will not drain funds from K-12 schools.

Whenever there is a tight state budget, it seems that community colleges suffer the most even though the system is by far the most efficiently run in California.

The state spends \$6 billion on community colleges. That's about the same that it spends on the UC and CSU systems, which have about one-third of the community colleges' student load.

The K-12 system has six times the student load of community colleges but spends 10 times as much.

There are 2.5 million people taking community college courses, with the equivalent of about a million full-time students. More than one-third of all 18- to 19-year-olds in California go to community colleges.

The community college system is increasingly more important as more of California's jobs require technical training and certification. Community colleges added 63,000 students to the state's skilled labor force with associate degrees and certificates last year.

Students who earned a vocational degree or certificate saw their earnings rise from \$25,600 for the last year before completion of school to \$47,571 in three years. Also, 94,000 students went on to four-year colleges.

Community colleges have the lowest student fees of any college system in the nation. But they have risen in recent years.

Even small increases in fees reduce enrollment because many of the students have limited financial resources.

State voters will have an opportunity to do what the Legislature should have done years ago and make sure commitment to community colleges receive adequate and stable funding within the Proposition 98 guarantees that cover K-12 and community college education.

Community colleges have been underfunded for too long despite their success. That could change on Feb. 5, 2008.

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