

Community Colleges Must Take the Initiative: Measure Being Touted for Nov. 2006 Is the Solution

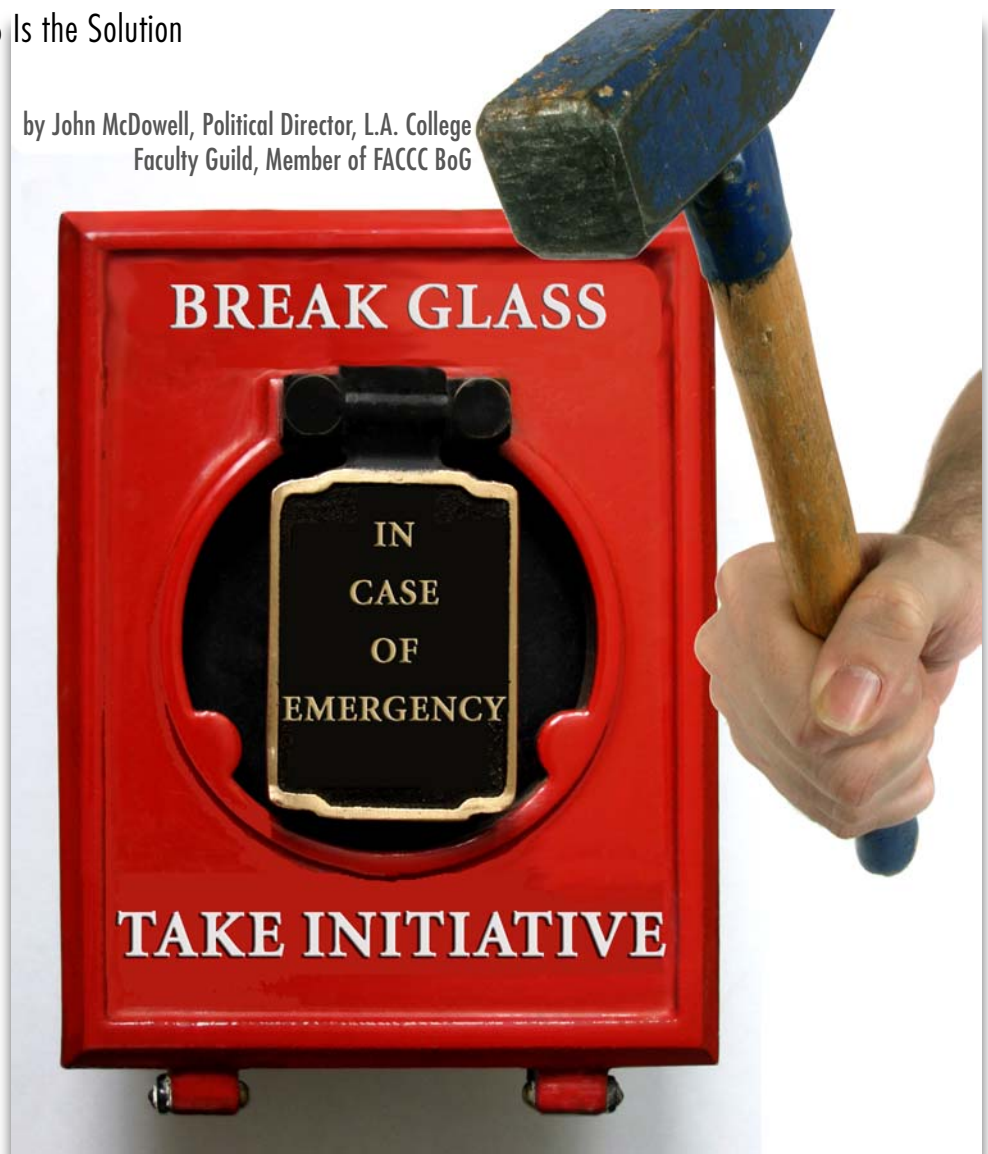
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Community colleges, a critical component of California's once shining example of higher education for all, today rank 47th of the 50 states in per pupil spending. The time has come to take bold and creative steps to reverse these fortunes and return to the heyday of higher education.

When California developed its Master Plan for Higher Education in the '60s, it guaranteed a college education to every resident — either at four- or two-year schools. To accomplish that goal, fees at universities were set very low, and community college tuition was free to residents.

Community colleges were plentiful, well funded and had open access. Adults flocked to them in record numbers. As a result, over the next decade California developed a well-educated work force and blossomed into the fifth largest economy in the world.

But the passage of Prop 13 in 1978 changed everything. The open door to colleges began to close, as taxes were slashed and funding decisions were shifted from local college districts to the state. In this new paradigm, large unions (like CTA, CESA, SEIU, and prison guards), cities and counties set the spending agenda, and community college needs were put on the back burner.



Despite educating three million adults each year, community colleges have never shown the political muscle needed in Sacramento around budget. Too many of our students do not vote, and when they do, it is not based on community college issues. The result has been less funding year after year.

In addition, chronic funding problems over the last decade led the state Legislature to shift a portion of the Prop 98 money earmarked for community colleges to K-12 schools instead,

resulting in a \$5 billion shortfall. That has meant fewer course offerings, larger classes, and fee hikes from \$11 to \$26 a unit — all conspiring to driving hundreds of thousands of students out of our colleges.

The Californians

Faced with this dilemma, FACCC, the Los Angeles College Faculty Guild, and the Community College League (CEOs and Trustees) formed a coalition in 2003 called the Californians. It began by building

alliances in Sacramento and developing strategic approaches to obtain community colleges' legal 11 percent "split" of Prop 98 funding. While helpful, these efforts did not turn the tide. Even in what was considered a "good" budget year among many of our legislative friends in Sacramento, 2005 funding is down seven percent, in inflation adjusted terms, from 2001.

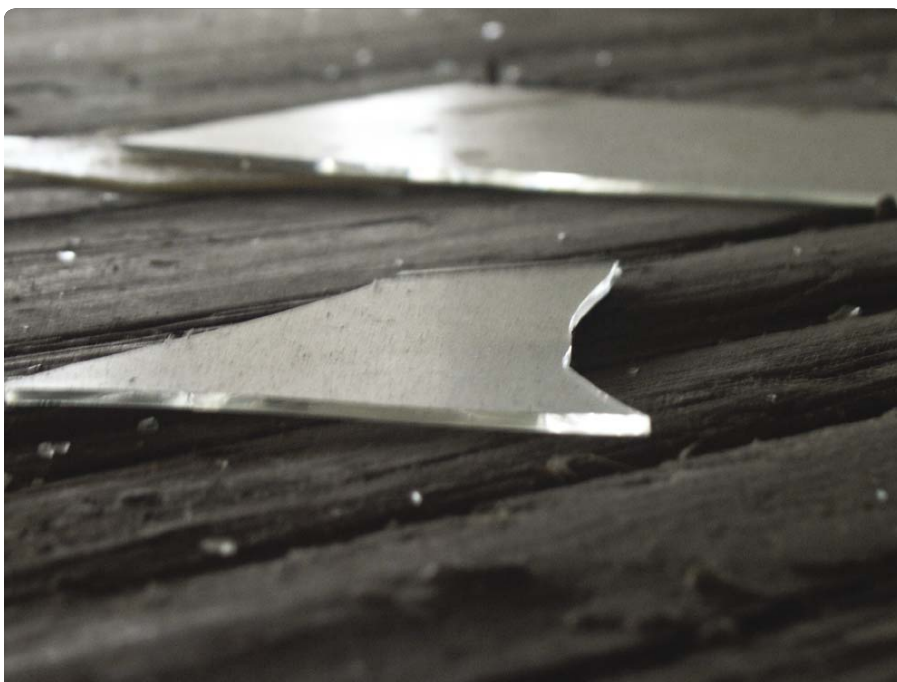
Obviously something more radical and creative is needed. Last year, the Californians began exploring a constitutional initiative for the November 2006 ballot. The initiative is drafted to address the major barriers to access — fees, growth funding based on actual need, and separating community colleges from K-12 funding. It is designed to stabilize funding, reflect real growth rates, and roll back fees to \$20 per unit. Future fee hikes would be limited to the growth of personal income and would require a two-thirds legislative

vote. The initiative would set growth rates to match need and minimize political influence in the Chancellor's Office.

The challenges of passing this initiative are daunting. After all, running a statewide campaign requires a minimum of \$4 million. But statewide polling commissioned by the Californians last spring revealed voter support for community colleges at 86 percent, with 69 percent saying they would vote "Yes" on our initiative. Such a high level of initial support makes victory possible. A win would improve access and quality, and help overcome the perception of our political weakness in Sacramento.

In addition to the fundraising challenge, the campaign will also need to mobilize sufficient numbers of our three million students to gather signatures to qualify the initiative for the ballot, and to galvanize their friends, family, and neighbors in order to win in November 2006. But it isn't rocket science, and it can be done.

Engaging our students in rolling back fees and stabilizing community college funding is grass roots democracy at its best. Fighting for the opportunity to go to college can impart a vital lesson to students, a lesson almost lost on the current generation, that they can have power over their own destiny. This is the politics of self interest for students, faculty, staff and administrators.



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For the initiative to succeed, college presidents will need to become fund raisers. Unions will need to dig deep. And each and every one of us must pull out our checkbooks and give generously. (See bottom of p. 7 for details.) Consider it an "investment" — one which can bring our system up to \$100 million more each year to improve access, help protect our colleges, and help us defend decent salaries and benefits.

We've had a lot to complain about during the past 20 years, but the time for complaining is over. With this initiative, we can shift from defense to offense. We can take a stand and make a difference. ■