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Today's editorial: Locking in their slice of the pie

Community colleges want state voters to give them guaranteed funding.

An Orange County Register editorial

The California Community College system is seeking voter approval of a new constitutional right giving it a guaranteed share of the state's educational tax dollars.

A coalition of community colleges and teachers has qualified a proposition for the February 2008 ballot that would change how the state calculates funding for education, and simultaneously reduce community college student fees to \$15 from \$20 per unit.

This is a bad idea. Ideally, we believe education should be a private matter, and one person should not be forced to pay for another's schooling. In the less-than-ideal world of public education, at the least, elected representatives should be free to allocate tax dollars according to ever-changing needs and demands. This proposition would remove discretion from the Legislature to guarantee a level of funding for community colleges, and even set a constitutional restriction on how much future student fees could be increased to meet growing expenses.

The state independent Legislative Analyst's Office calculates "major fiscal effects" if the initiative is approved. There will be a combined potential increase in tax spending on community colleges and kindergarten through 12th grade "of about \$135 million in 2007-2008, \$275 million in 2008-2009, and \$470 million in 2009-2010, with unknown impact annually thereafter."

The LAO estimates community colleges would lose \$71 million next year by reducing student fees, "with unknown impacts annually thereafter." Community colleges reducing their own income while guaranteeing increased state funding is a formula for disaster, particularly when the LAO estimates that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed 2007-08 budget is already about \$726 million in the red.

It certainly makes no sense to guarantee increased funding considering community colleges' condition. Earlier this year a study by the Public Policy Institute of California found community colleges underperforming in two fundamental areas – graduating students with two-year degrees and transferring students to four-year colleges. Another study, by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at Cal State Sacramento, found community colleges create barriers to degree completion and impede student success by not having entrance standards, or requiring prerequisites or remedial classes.

In addition to academic courses, community colleges provide recreational, vocational, adult education and

economic development programs. Colleges are not the most appropriate venue for such courses. When college funding is tied to amorphous goals ranging from preparing Ph.D. candidates to training in automotive collision repair and instruction in English as a second language, we suggest the scope is too broad. It's definitely too broad to demand a constitutional guarantee of funding.

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