

The Sacramento Bee

Study: California lagging in key college measures

'Report card' shows state trailing U.S., many other nations.

By Eric Stern - Bee Staff Writer

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The United States -- and more noticeably, California -- has fallen behind other nations in educating young adults and can no longer rely on its past reputation to succeed in the global economy, according to a study released today.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a San Jose-based nonpartisan group, issued its fourth in a series of every-other-year "report cards" that grades states in college preparation, affordability and other categories.

California fares better than most states, earning two A's, one B and two C's -- the same as its 2004 report card.

But California ranks poorly among other states in the number of high school students who enroll in college, and, internationally, the state is behind Hungary and Mexico in the number of certificates and degrees produced per every 100 students enrolled.

"We think California is more or less stuck," said Pat Callan, president of the public policy and higher education center. "While we're stuck, everyone else is moving ahead."

The nation -- and California -- remains a leader in the percentage of older adults with college degrees. But a more diverse, younger population is not getting into college and seeing it through at the same pace as the baby boomers.

The study's authors and supporters said California policy-makers need to renew the commitment for the next generation that the state made in 1960 to guarantee an affordable, accessible college education.

"The most important finding that struck me is that California is losing its higher education advantage," said Abdi Soltani, executive director of the Campaign for College Opportunity.

Business leaders also note that American students aren't competing with their classmates for jobs anymore, but with the millions of students in China and India who are getting math and science degrees in increasing numbers.

"We sort of have to rivet ourselves on the reality of our flat world," said David Rattray, vice

president of education and work force development with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. "If we stay on autopilot ... these scores are going to be significantly lower in the next five to 10 years."

Here is a look at California's report card:

- Preparation: C

The state has improved in this category, but is below average nationally. Eighth-graders perform poorly on math, reading, writing and science tests, indicating they are not well-prepared for a tough high school curriculum. The high school graduation rate also is below the national average.

- Participation: A

Heavily influenced by an extensive community college system, California leads the country in the proportion of working-age adults enrolled in college training. However, the report expressed pessimism about the lower percentages of young people enrolling in college.

- Affordability: C-

In 2002, California received an A in this category. Most states still get an F, but California, with its emphasis on low-cost community colleges as a starting point for a four-year degree and continued support for Cal Grant financial aid, has kept costs lower than other states. The state lost ground with recent tuition increases because of state budget cutbacks, and the cost of college remains out of reach for many families.

- Completion: B

California improved in this category, with more college students continuing their education toward a degree.

- Benefits: A

A high proportion of residents have a bachelor's degree, which helps the state economy and boosts civic involvement, from voting to charitable giving.

"Overall, a middling performance," said Callan of the education center in San Jose. "No one would look at these grades and say California is the leader in higher education it was 40 years ago."

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