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Report: Fewer grads going right to college

Statewide trend particularly sharp in San Diego, Imperial counties

DAVID GARRICK
STAFF WRITER

A sharp decline in the number of California high school graduates going directly to college is troubling news for the state's economic future, according to a report released Thursday on higher education trends.

More than 61 percent of high school graduates went straight to a four-year university or community college in 1995, but that ratio had shrunk to 52 percent by 2005,

according to a report from Sacramento State University's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy.

"A lot of students think it's OK to wait until later in life to start college, but it's just much harder to succeed that way," Nancy Shulock, the professor who authored the report, said during a conference call. "We need to send a loud message to students in high school that it is important to go straight into college."

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The report said the decline was particularly sharp in San Diego and Imperial counties, where only 48 percent of high school graduates went straight into college in 2005. The report did not include separate data for North County.

The local figure is particularly low for an urban area, with greater Sacramento at 56 percent, Los Angeles County at 58 percent, the San Francisco Bay Area at 61 percent and Orange County at 63 percent.

The report concludes that having a less-educated work force could hamper businesses seeking talented employees, and that a downward trend in earnings could reduce the buying power of California residents.

Shulock said the trend has been fueled partly by demographic shifts in the state, especially the increasing presence of Latinos, who attend college at a much lower rate than other ethnic groups.

"Groups with lower college-going rates are growing in population faster than other ethnic groups," said Shulock. "We want to issue a strong warning that if we don't close the gaps, there will be an economic decline in California."

In San Diego and Imperial counties, only 40 percent of people between age 18 and 24

are in college, which is lower than most urban areas of the state. But 6.4 percent of people ages 25 and older in this region attend college, the highest ratio in the state.

Dick Robertson, vice president of student services at MiraCosta College, attributed the decline in students going directly to college to a robust local economy and a 136 percent increase in community college fees between 2002 and 2004.

"The strong local economy has meant that people can find work right out of high school," said Robertson. "And the fee increases convinced many students that they could not afford college."

Robertson also said he is not convinced that attending college at an older age is a major problem.

"It's a concern, but I don't think people delaying college is necessarily a bad thing," said Robertson, explaining that some students need time to decide what their goals are. "The average age at MiraCosta and Palomar College is about 28."

Robertson said that officials at both of North County's community colleges and Cal State San Marcos have stepped up efforts in recent years to persuade students to start their college education quickly.

"We work in very close contact with Cal State San Marcos and Palomar on a variety

of initiatives aimed at encouraging young people to plan for college," said Robertson.

He said a great example was last week's Encuentros event at MiraCosta, where 500 middle school boys came to campus for a symposium on attending college.

MiraCosta recently began a program that encourages third-graders to think about college a decade ahead of time, and Palomar has an array of state and federal programs aimed at persuading ethnic minorities to make attending college a primary

goal.

Cal State San Marcos recently received a \$1.2 million federal grant to help encourage low-income students in Oceanside to think seriously about attending college. The grant will provide career and college counseling during the next five years to 600 students at Oceanside High and Jefferson Middle schools.

Thursday's report mentions such programs as possible remedies. It also suggests that students be given financial incentives to attend college immediately out of high school,

and that high schools and colleges try to align their curriculums better.

"One of the really critical points is the connection between high school and community college, but that is typically where there is the least coordination," said Abdi Soltani, executive director of the nonprofit campaign for college opportunity that co-sponsored the report.

Shulock agreed.

"There are 109 community colleges and they are so decentralized that they have varying standards," she said.

"That is an area where state policy changes could come in."

Robertson said local colleges have been working hard to align curriculum, but he said a giant hurdle is the fact that state standards for high schools and community colleges do not match up at the moment.

Robertson said he supports increased financial incentives for students who go straight to college, but he cautioned that such efforts could have the unintended effect of persuading students to attend college when they are not ready.