

Let's have a plan to increase college completion

Jack Scott, the chancellor emeritus of the California community college system, one of the nation's largest college systems, and a former California legislator, recently spoke in Mesa about how to increase college completion rates. His talk was sponsored by Mesa Counts on College, a program aimed at increasing college completion and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

If you've been around as long as I have, you can remember that 50 years ago 70 percent of the jobs were held by those who had a high-school education. That was sufficient.



My Turn
JACK SCOTT

Now the estimate is that jobs will require some type of college credential for 60 percent of the jobs. Our world is changing. It is becoming more and more significant for someone to possess a college education in order to get the kind of job they want.

Here's a quote I often give to students: "Would you like to have a million dollars?" Right away I get their attention. That's the difference in the lifetime earnings of someone who has a college degree over someone who has just a high-school diploma, a million dollars. That is important to our community.

It's estimated that those same people will pay \$177,000 more in local, state and federal taxes than someone with just a high-school diploma.

We have difficulty in college completion. But we can do something about it.

I want to give you practical suggestions. We all need to do something. My background is education. That's why I talk about (California's) Student Success Task Force.

We're talking in Mesa about college completion. How can we as educators make sure more of our students complete college?

The first thing we've got to do is we have to make our relationships with our high schools even stronger, making sure high-school and college teachers get together, making sure the courses

taught in high school prepare individuals for college.

They can't be in silos, separated from one another.

Also, for the first-year college student, there needs to be an immediate response, a careful orientation and working with that individual to come up with — by the end of that first year — a clear, definite plan of study.

In our nursing program at Pasadena City College, we had over a 90 percent completion rate. I don't think it was because our students studying nursing were more intelligent. They had a goal! They knew what they wanted to do.

When we allow students to come into our institutions and wander around, like a cafeteria, picking this course or that course, maybe they learn a great deal.

But they are much more prone to drop out unless they have a very specific goal. All of us in colleges have to make sure they have a specific plan of study.

We've got to look at our remedial education. In community colleges in California, about 70 percent of the students who come to us have to take either remedial English or math. Too often, we've made these kind of dreary courses.

We need to make sure they are more accelerated courses ... and tied in (to employment fields). It's a lot easier to learn math if you're a construction student if it's tied together with a construction course, where you're taking geometry, and you're understanding why you need geometry.

We're also saying to our students, "We're going to do all we can for you." We also are saying, "We want you to get busy."

One of our recommendations was that those students who had accumulated more than 90 units have to go to the back of the line in enrollment. We're trying to say, "You can't just stay there and be a professional student."

Our governor came up with a suggestion, I'm not sure it would get through the Legislature, but he said that after those students finish 90 units, unless they have a very good reason, they'll have to pay the full freight of what it costs.



Bill and Melinda Gates, through their foundation, fund Mesa Counts on College. AP

Our task force met all during 2011. We reported to our community college board of governors ... and they adopted all the recommendations.

Our Legislature adopted the Student Success Act in 2012, and it was signed by the governor. And now our board of governors is acting on the recommendations.

We were enrolling on the basis of continuing students getting to enroll first, a first-year student getting to enroll second.

That might have worked pretty well in times past. Now our community colleges are so crowded. We had to contract our enrollment. We had individuals who had accumulated 100 or 120 units. They were getting to enroll before our first-year students who wanted to take career technical programs and couldn't get into classes.

We are changing that. We're also saying to the adult who is there for personal enrichment. You can enroll but ought not to enroll ahead of the first-year student. If you want to take a French course because you're going to Paris in the summer, that's fine if there's room in the class.

The person who has to take French for a foreign-language requirement to go on to the University of California or California State University, they have priority.

We're seeing our community colleges beginning to institute mandatory orientation for first-year students, a

plan of study at the end of the first year.

We are beginning to see a slow increase in college completion. Some of the most exciting things are those that will be adopted at individual colleges as they look at their own populations.

We know (Arizona) will be a richer place if individuals finish college, if those coming into our employment complete that credential or degree.

We in community colleges have a tremendous variety of career technical programs. Those are credentials that require two years or less in order to get a vocational credential: nursing, radiological technician. Emergency-medical technician. We know the health-care industry is growing.

We did a little study in California on career technical programs. We have 175 different ones. I'm sure the Maricopa community-college system has many of those programs. We found the students who came into those programs and completed those with a certificate ended up almost doubling their wages within three years.

They started out below the median salary in California and ended up above the median salary.

The U.S. Department of Education did a study and said the middle-skilled jobs in the next decade would increase by 19 percent.

Certainly we need the highly-educated. We also need the middle-skilled jobs. We need individuals in our construction industry and auto-tech people.

You can advise us and tell the community colleges just what we can do. You can also provide internships.

As a community, you are saying we want to be a helping hand. It's good for the student. It's also good for (Arizona).

You have a great opportunity. Responding to opportunity is what life is all about.