

Executive Summary

The promise of California's system of higher education has always been the opportunity to succeed; it is the foundation on which dreams have been built. This promise has given rise to entire industries and ideas that have led the world. California's medical, technology, and agricultural industries, have set the bar for innovation across the globe.

Challenged from the Start: Stories of Student Perseverance and Determination in California's Community Colleges shares the complicated path that community college students across California are being forced to navigate in their quest to improve their lives, brighten their futures and contribute to their communities. It presents the stories of ten community college students who despite the differences in their ages, origins and life experience share a common trait: the uphill battle they face on their way to achieving college success. These stories, coupled with research showing that California's economy will demand one million additional college graduates by 2025, illustrate the urgent challenge of acting today. California must invest in college access and promote budget and policy reforms that reward improved completion rates across our public colleges and universities, and remove some of these hurdles.

These stories point out the high price we are making students pay as a result of cutting higher education funding, limiting access, and lacking an overall strategy for improving college completion. They

also highlight the need to promote public policies that remove obstacles for students in our community colleges. Without a commitment to investing in higher education and statewide reform and innovation, we risk leaving an entire generation of students trapped in a system that they cannot make sense of and which they can neither navigate nor afford.

Californians should be alarmed by the numerous obstacles students must overcome—rising at 5 a.m. in order to attend multiple community colleges or begging instructors in order to get the classes they need—and who, despite their best efforts, may still be among the 70% who enter community college and do not earn a certificate, degree or transfer to a university after six years.¹

Students willing to make the commitment should be given the opportunity to access the courses they need and stay on track to succeed. They deserve the chance to finish what they start. When they do, California's promise of the opportunity to succeed is preserved. We must not lose sight of the linkage between the success of our students, the capacity of our workforce, and the strength of our economy.

In this publication you will meet Toni Gomez, a 22-year-old student from Susanville, and read about her personal ordeal trying to find the money she needs to stay in school to complete her education.

¹ Moore, C., Shulock, N. (2010). *Divided We Fail: Improving Completion and Closing Racial Gaps in California's Community Colleges*. Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, CSU Sacramento

“The thing about life,” Toni tells us, “is when you run out of money, you don’t just fall over and die. You have to keep going.”

Challenged from the Start presents stories of perseverance, of how students were able to keep going—until they were able to find a way to succeed. It shares the obstacles these students encountered—interruptions in enrollment, severe overcrowding, lack of needed classes, confusion about the transfer process, lack of preparation, having to attend multiple schools simultaneously—and should make each of us ask how we can help them achieve success.

Michelle Ko, a 35 year old pursuing a nursing degree at Glendale Community College, tells about her inability to get the classes she needs in order to graduate and transfer. “There will be classes like my science classes,” she says, “where I’m going to have to beg the teacher on a daily basis to be added. If the professor says ‘I can’t do it,’ I know I’ll be reduced to grovelling.” Michelle, like most of the students featured, recognizes that the prospect for success is tenuous, that the only ‘solution’ is a deep and abiding flexibility on the part of the student.

Jay Cortez, a 25-year-old student at Los Angeles City College, describes the effect cutbacks have had upon the support services necessary to help students navigate the system: “I just feel like the state budget cuts have been so catastrophic that our community college literally doesn’t have the manpower to run successful student support services. It’s just a mess. They are expected to do a 10-person job with only three people.”

Then of course there is the issue of just who our public education system was designed to serve. There’s

the story of Karmina, a 22-year-old undocumented student at Los Angeles City College who has called California home for 20 years, for she knows no other, and poignantly tells us, “For me, I would appreciate it if the college gave us immigrant students some type of scholarship or work opportunity through the school. Just give us a chance.”

In the words of Diedrea Lewis, a 47-year-old student from the San Diego area who navigated her way through the state’s higher education maze for over a decade: “Nobody should have to go through what I’ve gone through,” she tells us. “We’re going to become a permanent underclass if they don’t invest in education so that community colleges can offer students the support services they need to be successful.”

Or consider the story of Carlos Maldonado, a 26 year old from the Central Valley town of Avenal, who wanted desperately to leave his hometown to study at California State University, Bakersfield, where he was inspired by his classes but felt isolated and lonely and didn’t know where to go for help. Reflecting on his experience, Carlos says: “Looking back, I still try to try to understand my experience because sometimes it’s hard for me to remember how I felt. But really, I felt lost. That’s not a good feeling because it doesn’t allow you to develop a plan. That was always my question during that process ‘what is the next step?’ I had no idea, and that’s a really ugly feeling to have.”

Carlos’s words ring true for all of us who care about higher education in California. “What is the next step?” If the state is going to remain a global power known for its innovative and skilled work force, then it will need to clear the road that students walk.

To find out what you can do, contact us at info@collegecampaign.org.

The Campaign for College Opportunity would like to thank Diane Wai for conducting the interviews and writing the stories of the students profiled in *Challenged from the Start: Stories of Student Perseverance and Determination in California's Community Colleges*.

The stories were collected in the summer and fall of 2011. Since their writing, some of the details provided may have changed. For example, the enrollment fee for California Community Colleges has gone up to \$36/unit and will be raised again in the summer of 2012 to \$46/unit.

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The Campaign for

College Opportunity

www.collegecampaign.org

*Ensuring that the
next generation of
Californians has a
chance to go to college
and succeed.*

Los Angeles Office

714 W. Olympic Boulevard

Suite 745

Los Angeles, CA 90015

tel: 213-744-9431

Sacramento Office

1215 14th Street

Sacramento, CA 95814

tel: 916-443-1681