

**CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES
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**An Open Letter to the California Community College CEO Board on
Student Fee Policy Considerations**

March 15, 2013

Colleagues,

In recent years there have been several attempts both in the Legislature and at individual colleges to allow for a different fee for some programs or courses. This differential fee approach has been suggested as a means of expanding access and serving more students. In recent months it has again been proffered as a way to allow students who can afford to pay the full cost of instruction an opportunity to take high-demand courses that will allow them to complete a program or degree while opening up additional seats in regular courses for other students. Although all the proposals have been recommended for seemingly good reasons, I am writing to express my grave concerns about a differential fee policy and to encourage instead a reaffirmation to our historic core value of low student fees and open access.

California has long been the envy of community colleges across the country for sustaining a policy of affordable access to public higher education. As a result of this approach, the state has long had one of the highest college-going-rates in America. The California community colleges have been a system that promised equal access opportunity to everyone regardless of educational, economical or family background, and it backed up that promise with low fees and plentiful offerings.

In recent years, however, fees have increased dramatically and funding cuts have caused educational rationing. In spite of these challenges the state has still retained the lowest cost of access to public higher education in the country and resisted the temptation to differentiate costs to students. During this period of increased rationing as literally hundreds of thousands of students were turned away, the call for different fee policies have again surfaced. Suggestions such as moving the system to outcomes based funding, charging differential fee by program, and increasing fees per unit to leverage more federal financial aid, have increased in frequency and intensity. Some have even suggested that raising fees was in the best interest of students. I strongly believe that charging different students different fees depending on demand, ability to pay or program of interest would ultimately be devastating to open access and has the potential to undermine a system that has been the gateway to a better life for all Californians regardless of their background. At the very least, any consideration of a different model of student fees would require clear answers to a myriad of questions including:

- **Enrollment demand:** Will enrollment demand and available funding come back into balance in the next few years, thus eliminating the need for us to consider drastic changes in our fee policies?
- **Affordability:** Would the creation of a differential fee model have a disparate impact on students of differing economic background?

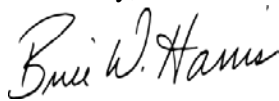
- **Policy implications:** Would the enactment of any type of different fee policy open the door to other funding changes such as differential funding by academic program.
- **Disparate impact:** Would a differential fee have a disparate impact by gender, race, ethnicity or age?
- **Market sensitivity:** Would a differential fee policy push California community colleges into a more market-driven environment?
- **Open access:** Would a differential fee approach end the low fee public policy environment in California?
- **Unintended consequences:** Would a differential fee approach provide policy makers with the incentive to reduce the state's investment in higher education and move that cost to the students or the local community?

It is important to underscore that current law (Education Code Section 78021) only provides for a different fee structure in the event that the class is purchased by a private employer or government agency to offer credit classes to their employees in a closed environment. It is this statute on which the Chancellor and Board of Governors have based their denial of previous requests for differential student fees.

In the past twenty years there has been only one example of experimentation in student fees. In the mid-1990s a \$50 dollar per-unit fee for students who had already completed the bachelor's degree was implemented. Research on the impact of that fee showed that the students most negatively impacted by the differential fee were those who needed to return to their community college to upgrade their skills or change their career due to labor market changes. The differential bachelor's degree fee was soon dropped as a result. It is clear from this example that experimentation in fee policy without full consideration of the potential consequences can be detrimental to students and the system.

Instead of differential fees, I encourage, as has our system for many years, a fee policy that would only allow for modest and predictable fee increases in response to the increasing cost of living.

Sincerely,



Brice W. Harris
Chancellor