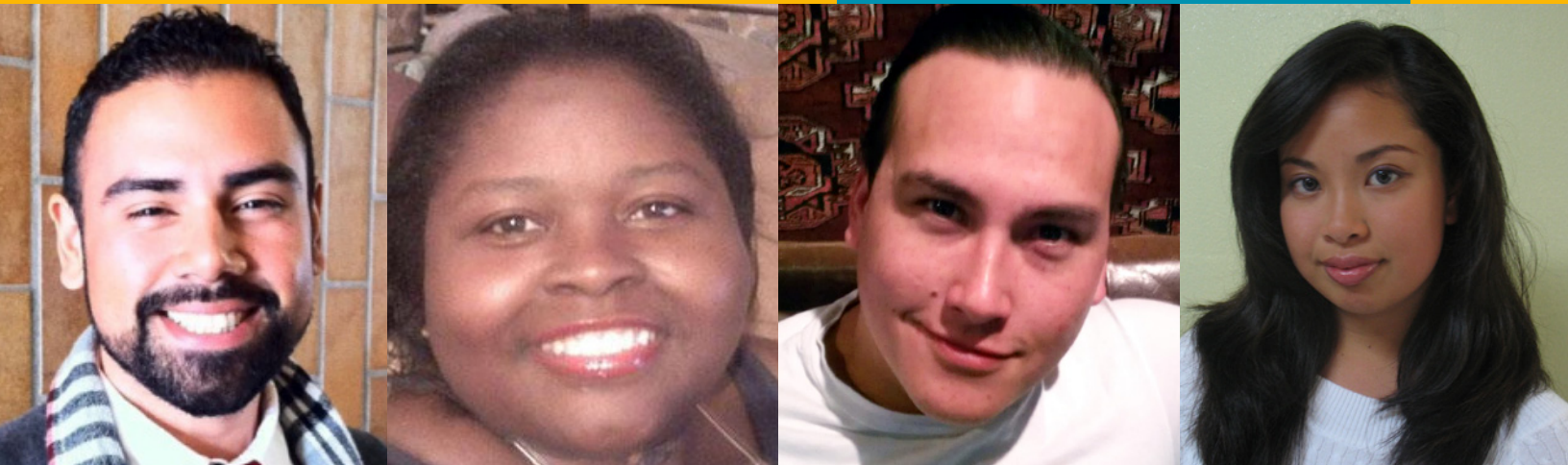
Challenged from the Start

Stories of Student Perseverance and Determination in California's Community Colleges



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

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

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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.

Connie Castelan

3 community college districts + 7 campuses + 2.5 years = 1 student's transfer path. (Los Angeles)

The latest round of deep budget cuts to the California Community College system mean students will experience even larger class sizes and further reductions in course offerings, student support services, and staffing. According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 140,000 students statewide were unable to enroll in 2009-10 due to overcrowding, and 200,000 students could be shut out in the 2012-13 year. To navigate a system plagued by shortage and increasing demand, many students take extraordinary steps to complete the 60 units required to transfer to four-year colleges or universities.

Connie Castelan, 19, is a prime example of such a student. Connie is the first person in her family to earn a high school diploma. She grew up in a predominately Latino neighborhood in East Los Angeles. Her parents migrated from Mexico City to Los Angeles in 1986 and work in the local restaurant industry as a waiter and waitress.

"My parents saw how education furthered people's lives," said Connie. "They look at education as the answer to everything." And so on their modest salaries, they sent Connie and her younger brother, Salvador, to the local Catholic schools from elementary to high school.

For Connie's tuition for high school, the Castelans were required to pay $400 each month. Every day after work, Mrs. Castelan put $1, $5, or—on good days—$10 into a jar, her tip money. The jar's contents went to Connie's high school tuition, and by the end of each month Mrs. Castelan had saved over $300 and had only the small remainder to pay.

Mrs. Castelan has always been her daughter's strongest advocate and motivator. Connie recalls a powerful incident when she was a junior in high school. Mrs. Castelan had returned home at 1:00 am following a long and frenetic shift at La Parrilla

restaurant. Connie noticed that her mom's eyes were red and puffy. "What is wrong?" Connie asked. Removing her jacket, Mrs. Castelan revealed a serious burn running the length of her forearm, from her hand to her elbow. She had burned herself on the grill, a workplace accident. As Connie applied salves to the burn, she recalls her mom crying, "I don't want this life for you. I don't want you to suffer. I want you to go on and be better." Mrs. Castelan worked hard to ensure Connie's education and that her daughter's life would not be one of toil. "To this day recalling that incident, it makes me emotional," Connie says.

Graduating with top honors in 2009 from Sacred Heart High School, in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, Connie was accepted to a number of top universities including the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Southern California; and the University of California, Berkeley. A Catholic school—the University of Notre Dame in Indiana—was Connie's first choice. Notre Dame offered a small amount of financial aid, but Connie needed to come up with an additional $30,000 a year. When it became clear that she and her parents would be unable to make up the difference, Connie decided to fulfill her lower division requirements at a California community college, where the fees—$26 per unit—were affordable, and she would transfer to Notre Dame in two years.

Connie first experienced the fierce competition for classes at community college the summer after high school when she tried to enroll in a chemistry class. At Pasadena City College and East Los Angeles Community College, the class was filled, but she made it on to the lengthy waitlists. Enrollment was determined by randomness and chance: the professors at both colleges raffled off the open seats. "I didn't get in because my name wasn't drawn from a hat," said Connie. And the problem of course shortages would only grow more complex for her.

Connie describes the first half of 2010 as the, "Horrible Spring. I was going to different colleges—even on the same day—just so I could get the classes I needed, and I was working a full-time job," she said.

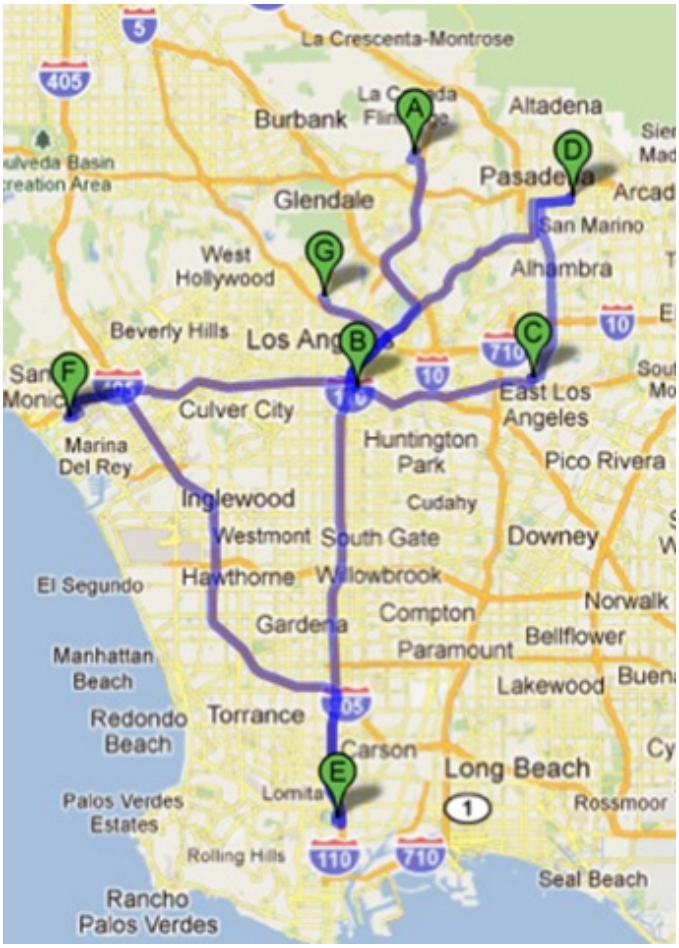
"I didn't expect college to be a complete breeze. I thought there would be difficulties, but not to this extreme," Connie says.

The elusive chemistry course finally materialized at Southwest Community College, a campus near the Westchester YMCA in South Los Angeles where Connie worked full-time as Executive Assistant to the Director. At the same time, she took an English course at East Los Angeles Community College. Connie's days began at 4:00 am and lasted nearly until midnight. Commuting close to 80 miles, she spent two hours each day on the road. The unrelenting pace was taxing, and it began to take a toll on her well-being.

At the time, Connie was only 18 years old. She lost weight because she could not make time for meals. She developed an anxiety disorder that to this day causes her to shake uncontrollably if under extreme pressure. "I was stressed out to the max," she says. Eventually, Connie reduced her work hours to 20 per week, and the pace of her life normalized. But the effects of class shortages persist, and Connie continues to take classes at multiple colleges simultaneously to compensate for this shortfall. According to Connie, she averages three colleges a semester.

Eighty percent of community college students work, and matters such as the timely posting of the schedule of classes impact working students. In a recent semester at Glendale Community College, the schedule of classes was posted no more than two weeks before the start of registration. This late posting gave Connie virtually no time to coordinate her work and school

schedules nor to request scheduling changes of her employer. "If you're going to take time off from work," Connie says, one must consider "if you're going to have enough money for the month, for the bills." The late posting leaves her and many other students scrambling to make last-minute calculations about finances. "You have to be very organized to have that planned out and with them not posting schedules, not posting times of classes, it puts a dent in your schedule, in your system."



Connie's pathway to transfer: 7 colleges in 3 districts.

In order for students like Connie striving to achieve their goals of higher education and eager to use the California Community College system, they must endure great hardships. Referring to the "Horrible Spring," Connie knows "for a fact that experience is going to be with me for the rest of my life. I will be telling my children the story of how I basically was killing myself to go to school. It's not a pleasant one, but it's one I had to go through to complete my education."

In the fall of 2011, Connie was taking five classes at three community colleges, and working two part-time jobs. In the two years since she graduated from high school, she has been enrolled at a total of seven community colleges. She transferred to Seattle Pacific University in Washington in the winter of 2012 where she plans to work toward a double major in English and political science and ultimately pursue a career in law.

Student Success Indicator: Transferring to a four-year university with two years of credit. Connie's story highlights a path many students take. The Transfer Velocity Project found that 40% of a cohort of community college students attended more than one college to get the classes they needed. Yet, in spite of this effort, only 43% of transfer students complete a transfer curriculum and 27% earn an associate degree.*

SOURCE: *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

Victoria Conlu

A student learns that to be successful in the system, assertiveness is required. (San Francisco)

Twenty-two-year-old Victoria Conlu grew up in a multi-generational Filipino household with her mom, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents in the San Francisco Bay area. Victoria's education was a family affair, and all the adults in the household contributed financially to her primary and secondary education. She explains that they never owned their own home, instead they rented because the family, "always invested a lot of money into sending me to private school." For Victoria, going to college was a foregone conclusion.

Several years ago, Victoria's mom, stepfather and younger siblings relocated to Texas. She now lives in Daly City, a city about ten miles south of San Francisco, where she shares an apartment with her grandmother. She is married to Erik, her high school sweetheart, who has just been discharged from the military as of last month.

A top student at Deer Valley High School, Victoria ranked number 13 out of 700 students. From high school, she was accepted to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and to Mills College, a school for women in Oakland, California. After deciding to switch focus from journalism to nursing, Victoria decided to enroll at City College of San Francisco (CCSF). It was affordable, and she knew several students who had gone through the nursing program and had positive experiences.

The first week of class brought many unexpected challenges.

"There were people desperate to get classes," Victoria says. She paints the scene: "Students packed every inch of free classroom space just hoping for a chance to add the course. Some brought folding chairs, others sat on the floor. Everybody just got really upset. There would be people standing outside of class who would start scenes with professors, like 'I really need this class! You don't understand!' It was really a hostile environment trying to get into classes."

"It took me a whole year to realize that I needed to nudge my way into places," Victoria says. "When I first started college I wasn't as assertive as some of the other students, and I wouldn't demand that I deserved to be in the class. I'd kind of hang back and not get a spot. I just didn't have as much of a backbone yet, so I couldn't demand that I be able to stay in the class, which is what I ended up having to do."

One semester, it was essential for Victoria to get a seat in an Introduction to Medical Chemistry course. The course was a pre-requisite for subsequent chemistry courses, and since she was unable to enroll in the course the previous semester, she risked delaying her transfer.

"I had to plop myself down into a seat and stay. I was not going to leave," she says. "I'd just sit in the classroom and I was like, 'I'm not leaving.' " Her persistence paid off, and the professor added her to the class.

"I think the way the registration system works at CCSF is that there are a certain number of students who can enroll. Then, the online registration gets shut down, and no other people can enroll. The teachers can give out these special permit codes to a certain number of people," she says. The special permit codes allow teachers, at their discretion, to add students beyond the online enrollment limit. Victoria found that some professors were indifferent to student demand. "I had this one professor who was like 'I don't want to give out all my permit codes because it's easier to manage smaller classes.' "

Many times, courses are offered at inconvenient times, or they overlapped with one another. "Let's say I needed to take an English class, a math class and a science class. They would all overlap each other. You'd have to pick one, and then you'd have to wait until the next semester to take the next class. By then, there would be a backlog of people who also needed to take that same class."

Like many students, Victoria went to great lengths to attend class. At the time, she lived in Brentwood, an East Bay city about 60 miles from San Francisco. She did not have a car, and her daily commute on public transportation took nearly four hours each way. She rode a bus to the Pittsburg stop on the BART subway line that took her to the campus. "I'd have to leave about 5 a.m. to get to a 9 o'clock class," she says. "I was always bringing my homework on the train and doing it to and from school, and eating breakfast at school while walking between classes."

"Many times people won't tell you what resources are available and you have to snoop around for yourself just to see what's there and what's useful to you," Victoria says. Among the resources she discovered and found useful were the free or low cost health services and the class planning services. The class planning service generates a semester-by-semester class schedule that helps students stay on track and keep abreast of requirements. "That's what trips people up. They'll

take a class, and then realize they took the wrong class. They won't know exactly what's required. It helps to talk to people who can help you stay on track." Class planning can be done by counselors or by peer-to-peer mentors.

When Victoria worked as a peer-to-peer counselor, she noticed that few students took advantage of the services offered. "So few people came to our offices." The main channel for information distribution was the posting of fliers on bulletin boards. "I think the schools should take up more of the burden of making sure people know about these kinds of things," she says. The school's website does not post extensive information on student resources. "There's not really a cohesive effort at the community college to make it known just what's going on."

Another issue Victoria stresses is a fragmented student body: "Students don't feel a sense of connection to each other." Increased competition among students for a shrinking pool of resources drives wedges in the student body. "I think the circumstances are such that everybody has to compete with each other and that makes people more prone to make divisions," she says. "The competition builds hostility between ethnic groups, well-to-do students, and those who need more aid, and that makes for a hostile learning environment."

Victoria is now a senior at San Francisco State University (SFSU). The nursing program requires an application and admission that is separate from the University's and Victoria is in the process of applying. In fact, she is applying to several nursing programs; CSU San Bernardino, CSU Sacramento and San Jose State University. In all, she spent four semesters at CCSF before transferring on time and on track. After two semesters at SFSU, she returned to CCSF to take two courses she could not get at the university. She says the problem of class shortages is one facing the state's entire public higher education system.

Student Success Indicator: Following successful enrollment patterns. Students following certain patterns such as passing college-level English and math within 2 years, or earning at least 20 credits in the first year, complete at higher rates than those that don't. Yet too few students follow these patterns (36%, 29%, and 25%, respectively).* Victoria rose to the challenge of forcing her way in so she could transfer on time; other students without the strong support of family and with life pressures surrounding them may simply get discouraged and give up.

SOURCE: *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

Alex Pader

A student leader finding his way. (Napa)

Alex Pader, 25, is in his senior year at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), where he is a transfer student. He just completed his term as President of the Student Senate for California Community Colleges (SSCCC), the statewide organization that represents and advocates for students in California's community colleges. Alex's path to CSUS was a winding one, and he has a keen understanding of the California Community College system's complexity and clear ideas about the need for improved student support services.

Alex grew up in the Northern California town of Napa, just 50 miles from San Francisco and world famous for its wine-making. His parents both have bachelor's degrees, and in high school the central question among his peers was not, "are you going to college?" but rather, "which college are you going to?"

He graduated from New Technology High School in 2004 and moved to San Francisco, enrolling at City College of San Francisco (CCSF). Alex attended CCSF for four consecutive semesters, but at the conclusion of his time there, he remained ineligible to transfer to a four-year institution, and had not earned an associate's degree or a technical certificate.

"I was taking some classes, part-time. I didn't really know what I wanted to major in. I didn't do very well. I didn't have a lot of direction," he says. At CCSF, it was difficult to meet with counselors—the wait time to see one was typically a month.

Alex believes that counselors are best positioned to help students who know exactly what she or he wants. If a student wants to transfer to the University of California at Davis and major in animal biology, a counselor can help. Or if a student wishes to pursue a career technical education (CTE) as a firefighter, a counselor can get them there. But most students are like Alex: they come to college in search of those answers. For these students, counselors are less instrumental. "I do not blame the counselors. I know the pressures that they are under. They have 10- or 15-minute appointments. . .you're in, you're out. . .you ask a couple of questions and hopefully they are able to help you out," says Alex. Because Alex believes that a 15-minute counseling session is grossly inefficient to help students like him find the right path, a well-publicized resource center that provides reference information about careers and their educational requirements, majors and the associated careers, and the CTE programs available at the individual community colleges across the state would be a better compass for students and ultimately help reduce the dropout rate.

The California Community College system has nearly 3 million students, but according to a recent study tracking degree-seeking students between 2003 and 2009, less than one-third of all students completed. "There are a lot of people who take one semester or two semesters, then they drop out. They don't come back. If you do poorly for a couple of semesters, you're going to probably leave. That's really what happened to me. I did poorly for three semesters and that was enough for me to say, 'hey you know what, maybe this is the time for me to move on' and I backed out," Alex said. In 2005 he withdrew from CCSF and enrolled in the Silver State Helicopter Academy in January 2006.

"I heard an advertisement on the radio. I called." At the time Silver State Helicopter Academy was the largest helicopter flight school in the world. Alex attended an open house. It was impressive. Held at an enormous hangar at the Oakland Airport, a couple hundred people attended and milled about the school's impressive fleet of big, gleaming helicopters. Alex signed up and, as required by the Academy, his family paid the whopping $82,000 flat tuition up front. It was a two-year program but, by the end of 2007, the school declared bankruptcy, leaving students with incomplete flight training and massive loans.

With four semesters' worth of coursework and $82,000 racked up in debt, Alex returned to Napa Valley College in the spring of 2008 where, after an initial exploration of a CTE path, he began taking courses for transfer to a California State University campus. Within two semesters he got into a groove, found his niche, and began to thrive. Reflecting on his experience at Silver State Helicopter Academy, "flight school put me under pressures where I had to learn. It taught me how to learn, taught me how to study, something I had not learned in high school or during my previous time in community college," Alex said.

"I'm a big supporter of mandatory orientation or student success classes that teach students how to learn. How do you take good notes? How do you maintain your calendar? How do you make sure you have enough time to study? That made all the difference in my success once I returned to Napa Community College."

The lack of a common course numbering system has also been a problem for Alex and many other community college students. He had four semesters' worth of classes from San Francisco that were incompatible with Napa classes. Despite belonging to the same college system, "you're dealing with apples and oranges," Alex says. Upon entering Napa, Alex

submitted his CCSF transcripts to an evaluator to determine course compatibility. Is CCSF's English 1A class equivalent to Napa's English 120? Would CCSF's Political Science 1 compute with Napa's two-semester Political Science 100 and 101? "It makes it pretty difficult to figure out, if you just look at it on a piece of paper," says Alex.

The process of evaluation is long and can take several weeks. It requires one to wait for the processing and delivery of official transcripts and then the actual evaluation time. While a counselor could help, their scope of knowledge is mostly limited to the region. "The system is so complex, one individual can't possibly know it all," says Alex.

The California Community College system is vast, comprised of 72 districts and 117 campuses. "At Napa, biology classes are hard to come by, so students take them at Santa Rosa or Solano Community Colleges. A counselor could probably tell you which class you need at one of those campuses, because those are the campuses nearby and because those are the ones they deal with regularly. But they probably wouldn't be able to tell you about Butte College or Los Angeles City," Alex explains.

At the smaller Napa Valley College, information about student resources was easier to come by than at CCSF. For the first time in his college career, Alex availed himself of services he had not known existed at CCSF. Observant professors referred students they saw struggling to the math and writing labs on campus. If Alex had trouble with math homework, he sought help from math lab tutors. He strengthened his writing skills in the writing lab, where he received help structuring and editing papers. Had he known these resources existed on the San Francisco campus, Alex feels he would have been less likely to withdraw.

In Napa, Alex became active in student life, specifically student government. His service in student government opened his eyes to how policy works on community college campuses. It inspired him. "I see public service, politics, and good policy as the best ways to help improve people's lives and to make the world a better place," he says.

Alex was able to complete the transfer curriculum and successfully enrolled at CSUS. He is currently pursuing a career in public service. He resides in Napa, where he is networking and exploring opportunities in the local political scene. He will graduate from CSUS this year.

Student Success Indicator: Entering in a program of study within the first year. Alex's story underscores the need for students to receive counseling and enroll in a program of study early. Research shows that community college students that enter into a program of study *within the first year* are nearly twice as likely to complete a certificate, associate degree, or successfully transfer to a four-year university than students that don't.*

SOURCE: *Moore, C., Shulock, N. (2011). *Sense of Direction: The Importance of Helping Community College Students Select and Enter a Program of Study*. Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, CSU Sacramento

Yessica Escobar

A loss of time and money without early guidance and intervention. (Los Angeles)

Yessica Escobar's first semester at Los Angeles Community College (LACC) was challenging. She is like many hardworking California community college students who struggle to balance between work and achieving their academic goals. She is also a person who has exceeded all that her parents imagined possible for her.

For 20-year-old Yessica, college was not originally part of life's plan. She is the second child of Maria and Jose, a sample maker in the garment industry and a building maintenance worker, respectively, both from El Salvador. "We just didn't think college was a possibility. It seemed so expensive. We didn't understand there was a difference between community colleges, UCs and Cal States. We just thought they were big money institutions that were too expensive for anyone as poor as us to get into," Yessica recalls.

Yessica is bright and curious. She attended two Los Angeles public high schools, the James A. Foshay Learning Center and West Adams Preparatory High School, from which she graduated in 2009.

Mr. Cuevas, Yessica's eleventh grade teacher, was especially influential. "He really got us into school. He told us we could be better than what the statistics might have said about us. He motivated most of our classmates to attend college. He inspired me a lot." For the first time ever, Yessica's mom attended a parent-teacher conference with Mr. Cuevas. "He told her that he saw in me the capacity to go to college. And after that I actually told my mom for the first time I'm going to go to college. "

In Yessica's first semester, she enrolled in four courses at LACC, and she held two jobs: on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, she worked a full-time office job; during the week, she also worked a part-time night job babysitting four children under the age of five. Her days began at 5:30 a.m. and ended at 1:30 a.m. the next morning. On top of the arduous schedule, she had no car, so hours were added to her day commuting by city bus and subway. Because of this exhausting schedule, something had to give—and it did. Eventually, she dropped three of her four courses.

Yessica would have benefited from mandatory first semester orientation and counseling sessions. "The first year was the hardest for me. My sister went to Cal State Northridge, so when I asked for help or advice, she didn't have any because she wasn't attending community college," Yessica said. She did not know what to expect, and shared, "it was the decision-making that was hard." She did not know that completing a full course load of 15 units would not be humanly possible with her work schedule. She was uncertain which courses to take. Many conventions—like finals week schedule—were unfamiliar to her; she did not understand that finals have their own schedule and do not take place during regular class sessions. She did not know books could be purchased online at a greater discount than the college bookstore offered.

Along the way, Yessica also received bad advice from well-intentioned staff. When it became clear that she could no longer manage work and school, she consulted with a financial aid representative about the trouble she faced. The staff member advised her to withdraw from the classes. Yessica followed this advice, withdrawing from all but one class. Weeks later, she would learn there was a penalty for doing so—the college demanded repayment of the $900 student loan she had received and had used toward tuition and books. In the end, Yessica paid for four courses, but received credit for only one.

This unexpected debt created a financial hardship, but Yessica repaid the loan in two months' time.

Beyond scheduling and financial aid challenges, Yessica would also come to find out that assessment tests could stifle her educational progress. While California community colleges are designed for open access, most students must demonstrate their readiness for college-level work by passing assessment tests in language arts and math.[1] The results of the test determine course level placement.

Yessica expected that she would do extremely well on her math assessment test given that she is a self-described "math nerd." Unfortunately, on the day of her assessment test, Yessica was extremely ill with a fever. "I couldn't even concentrate," Yessica said. Under normal circumstances, she felt she would have aced the math test, but she did not. "I scored into Math 125, and I was very surprised."

Math 125 is a non-transferable intermediate Algebra course, a math Yessica had already studied in high school. She had expected to place at least into Math 240, the next course in the math sequence and a college level, transferable course. "If I wanted to retake the test, I was told I had to wait six more months." Rather

1 Brown, Richard S. and Niemi, David N. "Investigating the Alignment of High School and Community College Assessments in California," June 2007.

than wait, Yessica took Math 125, passed it, and enrolled in Math 240 the following semester.

Since she could not retest immediately, Yessica took a course she did not need and she was denied the opportunity to advance her math skills and knowledge. This ultimately cost Yessica time and money. It also meant that a student who needed to take Math 125 could not.

Because transfer track students typically transfer to four-year institutions within four to six semesters, and because math courses are taken in an ascending sequence, a transfer track student will take no more than six math courses before transferring out of community college. Yessica laments that she will lose out on the option of taking an advanced math class—such as ordinary differential equations or linear algebra—because she had to take Math 125.

In her second semester Yessica visited a counselor, and he made a two-year transfer plan for her. The counselor advised her to take classes during the winter and summer intersession to make up for the units she lost the first semester. "I did it, and it's now one of my favorite times to take classes."

Yessica's parents now see the importance of higher education. "Their mentality was get a high school degree, and then you can get a job. Now they see that we are in a better place," Yessica said. "Despite the challenges and difficulties with enrollment, I still know it is very important for people to go to college because it changes your life."

Today, Yessica is on track to transfer in 2012, and she will double major in Math and History. Her dream school is the University of California, Los Angeles. She currently serves as a tutor at Bancroft Middle School, teaching math, English, history and science to 7th and 8th graders. Her younger brother is also now a freshman at LACC.

Student Success Indicator: Taking a "student success" course. Research shows that students taking courses that teach good study and life skills, along with helping them develop strategies for reaching their higher education goals and disseminating information about services and resources available to them, have better outcomes.* This classroom-based intervention can reach students like Yessica that may not otherwise seek help and can be more efficient than individual appointments with counselors that do not have the time to sit down with every student.**

SOURCES: *Florida Department of Education (November 2006). *Taking Student Life Skills Course Increases Academic Success*. Tallahassee , FL.
**MDRC (February 2010). *Can Improved Student Services Community College Student Success?* Washington, DC.

Karmina

The story of a DREAMer doing what it takes to be an example for her younger sister.
(Los Angeles)

Born in Puebla, Mexico, Karmina was two years old when she crossed the United States-Mexico border at Tijuana with her parents. She has only known life here in the U.S. Her family settled in Los Angeles. Her father is a chef who worked his way up from a busboy.

Karmina, 22, graduated from John Marshall High School in 2007. Today she is a second year student at Los Angeles City College (LACC). She is also undocumented, "I often get discouraged because I don't have papers," says Karmina. Without documents, she cannot work legally in the United States. She observes that many employers seek employees with bachelor's degrees, and she sees the competitive advantage of having a college degree.

It is her beloved younger sister, Susana—14 years old and U.S. born—that keeps Karmina going. Since Karmina was 15 years old, she has volunteered at Susana's after-school program, "LA's Best," and recently enrolled her sister in a performing arts program at Gabriella Charter School. "She's a big influence on me. I want her to be somebody," Karmina said.

Karmina recalls a conversation she had with Susana: "One day I told her, 'You're going to go to college.' And Susana asked, 'Why, when you're just sitting here, you're not doing anything?' " That's when it hit Karmina. She was not doing anything, and the thought pushed her to register at LACC.

At LACC, Karmina faces many of the same challenges other community college students face—lack

of counseling and limited knowledge of student support services. However, Karmina cites financial challenges stemming from her undocumented status and preventing her from accessing financial aid and scholarships as only complicating her ability to complete.

Karmina feels there are limited resources available to undocumented students on campus. "I know there are students other than myself who are in the same situation, but I don't know who I would talk to about my status," says Karmina. She would like to see an office where undocumented students can go to get answers to their legal questions: information on grants, financial aid, and informal job opportunities; and where they can keep abreast of the status of the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors).

Not being able to access financial aid and scholarship dollars as a result of her status, Karmina argues that books, supply fees, and transportation costs are much more of a barrier to completion. "If I had papers, I could get financial aid and not have to worry about money," she explained. She estimates that she pays between $600-800 per semester for tuition, school fees, books, school supplies and transportation. For example, Karmina shares that a program that allowed students registered for 12 or more units to have an unlimited Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) System pass for $20 a semester is now $144 and too expensive. This is particularly problematic considering more than half of the students at LACC rely upon the MTA to get to school, herself included. With regards to recouping textbook costs, Karmina shares: "They say they give you money back, but they give you $5 back on a $100 book." Karmina often resorts to borrowing friends' old textbooks to avoid the cost, if she can.

"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," Karmina says. In the restaurant industry, Karmina's father worked his way up from dishwasher to chef. The same upward mobility in labor should be extended to education.

California Governor Jerry Brown recently signed legislation, the first part of the California DREAM Act, which allows undocumented college students limited access to financial assistance in the form of private scholarships. The second part of the DREAM Act was signed and will give undocumented students access to state financial aid in the fall of 2013.

In the two years Karmina has attended LACC, she has met with a counselor only once, and she describes that meeting unfavorably. The session lasted ten minutes, and she felt the counselor was generally uninterested. As if by rote, he showed Karmina the course requirements for art majors and then she felt, "pushed out of the office." Ideally, Karmina would like an assigned counselor and full 30-minute sessions. Because she seeks guidance in selecting specific courses and professors, she does not know the unit requirements for graduating with an associate degree or for transfer to a four-year university. This information was not discussed during her one session. "That's something I would ask my counselor," she said.

To date Karmina has never used any academic preparatory resources like writing or math labs. "I don't like bothering people, so I won't ask them for help," she says. For students like her who find it difficult to ask for help, a more personalized counseling experience would likely encourage use of those resources, and in the case of undocumented students, help combat feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

Karmina is still undecided on her major because she feels "I haven't found my strength yet but I am definitely working on it."

Once the session begins, she will schedule an appointment with a counselor to get help determining the classes she will need.

Student Success Indicator: A college completely focused on student success and committed to data-driven decisions. Student demographics are changing and "business as usual" no longer fits the needs of many students like Karmina with extraordinary circumstances. Research shows that while 34% of community college "degree-seekers" are Latino, and 40% are white, only 23% of "completers" are Latino and 48% are white.* Strategies to better serve vulnerable students, such as first-generation and low-income students, can be better formed by data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and other important student demographics.

SOURCE: *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

Carlos Maldonado

The son of farm workers on a path to realize his uncle's dream of becoming Dr. Maldonado. (Avenal)

When one thinks of California, the great metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco immediately come to mind. Yet, there is another important region—the Central Valley. One-quarter of the nation's food comes from this fertile 450-mile north-south swath of land. It is here that Mexican-American and Filipino-American grape pickers formed the United Farm Workers union in 1965. An estimated 6.5 million people live in the Central Valley, and poverty rates are among the state's highest.

The educational experience of students from the Central Valley is unlike those of their urban or suburban counterparts. Primary and secondary school students here have fewer educational options. They lack access to magnet school programs or even bussing to "better" school districts.

Carlos Maldonado, 26, was raised in the Central Valley town of Avenal, which means "oat field" in Spanish. With a population of just over 15,000, Avenal is located midway between Los Angeles—180 miles to the south—and San Francisco—200 miles to the north. The local industry is predominately agriculture, although Avenal State Prison is one of the largest employers in the area.

Carlos's parents, Elisa and Carlos, Sr., came to the Unites States from Michoacán, Mexico, in their mid-teens. Carlos, Sr. was educated to the 5th grade. Elisa had a 4th grade education and would later earn her high school diploma in the United States. For 26 years, Elisa has worked at a pistachio plant sorting pistachios and, until he was disabled by injury, Carlos, Sr. worked picking fruit and pruning trees in the almond orchards.

In school, Carlos received many academic awards and distinctions. Between kindergarten and the 12th grade alone, he earned two dozen academic achievement awards. He was also honored as his high school class valedictorian.

"I knew college was a good thing. I always knew I was going to make it there somehow, one day, to a good college," Carlos said.

Carlos had uncles who had attended community college, and he observed that they held higher status jobs than those who did not attend college. One day at a family party when Carlos was in the seventh grade, an uncle said to him 'maybe one day you should go out and get a Ph.D. and become Dr. Maldonado.' "I thought no, no, no. What? A Ph.D.? I had never seen a Mexican get a Ph.D., so what made him think I would get one?"

Carlos was fortunate to have unconditional family support for his academic ambitions. He also learned that it was possible to take classes at nearby West Hills Community College while still in high school and earn college credit. He enrolled in a history class during the summer of his sophomore year. "I remember I only had a driving permit, and I'd have to take my dad. I told him we were going to college and he said, 'OK,' so we'd get in the car and then he would wait for me," said Carlos. "They were long classes because it was summer, so my dad had to listen to a lot of radio. He waited in the car mostly."

After graduating from Avenal High School in 2002, Carlos—like a pioneer—forged an uncharted and winding course through the state's three college systems—the California Community College system, the California State University System, and the University of California system. Without the benefit of a counselor or mentor, his guidance system through these systems was primitive and inadequate.

The process of college enrollment can be very complicated for a first-time college student. From high school, Carlos was accepted to California State University, Northridge (CSUN), among other universities. "My heart was set on CSUN, because it was not too far from home and yet far away enough for me to be able to venture out of the Valley," Carlos said. But weeks before his first semester at CSUN was to begin, he received a letter from the housing office informing him that he was on a wait-list for a dorm room. More than 100 students were ahead of him on the list. "I had no idea there was a housing application that had to be submitted. I was like, whoa, OK, this is a problem because classes are less than one month away and I have nowhere to live. I shared the news with my parents and asked what could we do? I called CSUN, and I told them the situation. I don't even live in the area…what am I going to do?" Carlos said.

At risk was nearly $10,000 in scholarship awards that Carlos had won. His primary concern was keeping two of the biggest: the Masonic Foundation Scholarship, worth about $5,000, and the Paramount Farming scholarship, worth about $4,000. Both required proof of enrollment in a four-year institution.

CSUN had moved him up on the housing wait list but could not guarantee accommodations. Rather than chance losing the award money, Carlos enrolled at California State University, Bakersfield, a university that had also accepted him.

Although he found the courses to be intellectually stimulating, Carlos's experience at CSU Bakersfield was difficult. He felt lonely and isolated. To maximize study time, he had opted to live alone in a single dorm room rather than with a roommate. He did not own a car, so off-campus diversions were inaccessible. Moving only between classes and his apartment, and still feeling the heartbreak of being unable to attend CSUN, Carlos was unhappy.

"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," Carlos said. "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."

A student must wait a full year before she or he can transfer between Cal State campuses. Carlos felt strongly that he could not wait out the year, so he sacrificed the scholarships and returned to Avenal, enrolling at West Hills Community College (WHCC) with the hope of transferring to another four-year institution.

"I was in limbo now with the whole college experience. I was questioning whether or not I was college material any more. I didn't really know who to talk to," Carlos recalls. Luckily, Manuel, a friend from high school, was studying at WHCC. He introduced Carlos to a counselor named Sandy, who gave him the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) advising form. The IGETC spelled out the courses required for transfer to a University of California or California State University campus.

Carlos followed the guide and took a full course load, earning a 4.0 grade point average every semester. He regained his academic self-confidence. He feels he would not have learned of the IGETC advising form if not for Manuel. He would not have known that there was a transfer protocol to follow and believes without it, he would have enrolled in courses at will. "A lot of information I got was through word of mouth from other students," said Carlos. "There needs to be a formalized way to get information out to students and their families." "The transfer process needs to be made less mysterious in community college." said Carlos.

He notes that in the Central Valley, vocational education programs—such as the Forklift Driver Certification—are advertised heavily in local papers. "I don't see any of that effort to get students to be on track to transfer," said Carlos. He feels that vocational education is prioritized over transfers in an effort to serve the local economies—agriculture and correctional institutions. A relatively new program at WHCC, the Psychiatric Technicians Program is highly impacted. "It has a huge waiting list, there are students doing whatever they can to get into that program," said Carlos. It takes eighteen months to complete, and students who finish the program will assist clinicians with interventions and treatments in the correctional facility hospitals. According to Carlos, the college advertises the program as "quick—and you come out with a job, which is fine." But given the state's predicted shortage of individuals with bachelor's degrees, Carlos says colleges must change their communication strategies. "West Hills, and any other community

college for that matter, must advocate transfer as a top option," he says. He wonders why students from that area don't take the transfer route: "It's almost like if you want to go do something, you have to go work in the prisons. That's what it sounds like to me."

After a year and a half at WHCC, Carlos transferred to the University of California, Irvine (UCI), where he majored in Psychology and Social Behavior and Criminology, Law and Society. He graduated with top honors.

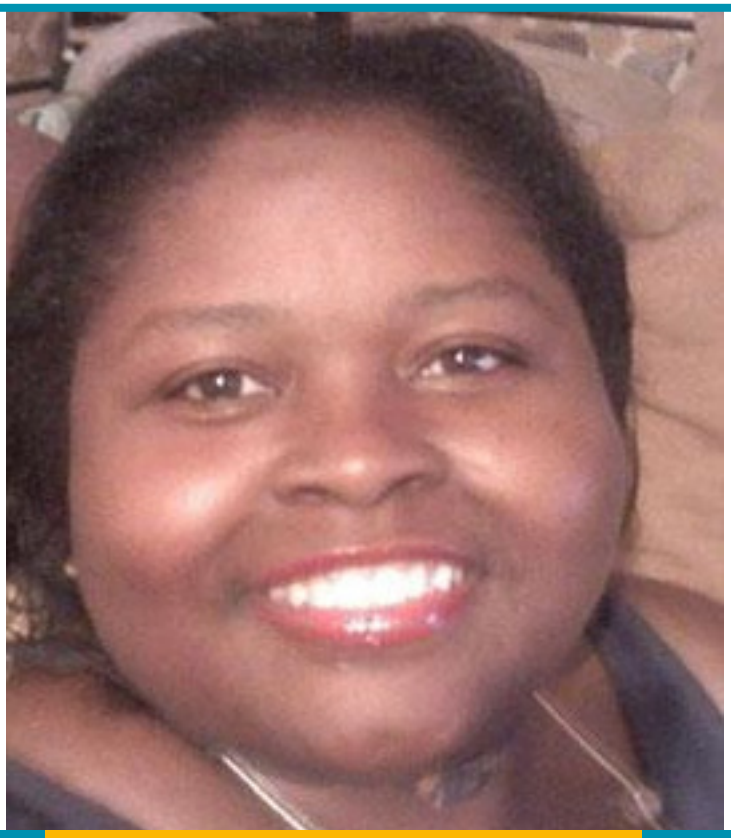
Carlos' brother Osvaldo is now in his fourth year at UCI, and Mrs. and Mr. Maldonado have a much easier time helping their youngest son Eduardo, 13, prepare for college thanks to the path paved by Carlos. Today, Carlos is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Education and Information Studies Program at the University of California, Los Angeles, and he is close to realizing his uncles' dream of becoming the first Dr. Maldonado in the family.

Student Success Indicator: Completing courses. What may seem like an obvious indicator of student success is not mirrored in student behavior. Carlos regained his academic self-confidence when he started to successfully move through the IGETC coursework and could see the progress he was making. But in a study tracking a cohort of students entering the California Community College system in 2003 over a six-year period, students completed only 69% of the credits they attempted. Black and Latino students completed credits at even lower rates, 49% and 58%, respectively.*

SOURCE: *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

Diedrea Lewis

The dreams of a single mother, spanning nearly three decades, are realized. (San Diego)



Born in Ennis, Texas—a mid-sized town about 40 miles south of Dallas—Diedrea Lewis, 47, was the tenth child of a large African American family headed by her father, a U.S. veteran and a custodian, and her mother, a homemaker. Diedrea describes her family as "chronically poor," and yet "it was always instilled in me to go to college. That was the equalizer."

After graduating from Ennis High School in 1982, Diedrea enrolled at Navarro Community College in Corsicana, Texas, about 20 miles south of Ennis, where she lived in the dorms. Although she had some financial assistance, it was increasingly difficult for Diedrea to cover the costs. Tuition at the school at that time was about $150 per unit. After a year, Diedrea dropped out of college and moved to Dallas where she joined the work force, taking various administrative and switchboard operator jobs. In 1988, she gave birth to her daughter, Chassler. Times for her were very rough, but she never gave up on her dream of going to college. In 1990, she got another chance.

Diedrea won a trivia contest on a local Dallas radio station, and her winning prize was a pair of front-row seats to a New Kids on the Block concert. Back then, the tickets were a hot item. "I sold those tickets to buy a bus ticket out to California because I had heard that you can practically go to college for free," Diedrea said. She had heard that fees in the California Community College system were $5 per unit. "I thought, 'Who couldn't afford that?!' " With little more than the clothes on her back, Diedrea and her infant daughter set out for California and the promise of an affordable higher education. She wanted to study broadcast journalism or mass communications and dreamed of becoming a sportscaster like Jayne Kennedy, the African American sports commentator who was among the first women to break into broadcast sports.

Diedrea ended up in Chula Vista, California, a city midway between San Diego and the U.S./Mexican Border. To support herself and her daughter, she again took work as a switchboard operator, and she explored careers like air traffic control. Making ends meet was always difficult, and at times she was on public assistance. "The last two weeks of the month, that's when it got really tight," she remembers. "It really got hard."

Four years after her arrival in San Diego, Diedrea enrolled at San Diego City College (SDCC). After years of working at administrative jobs, her life had finally settled into a routine. She had a decent apartment, and Chassler was enrolled in school, so the high cost of childcare was no longer a worry. She could finally allocate time to pursuing her educational dreams.

While it seemed that Diedrea was on her way, she ended up attending SDCC intermittently for over a decade—from 1994 to 2006—often dropping out for years at a time to work and save money to put toward fees and books. In all, she earned only 29.5 units at SDCC, far below the number of units required for an associate's degree, vocational certificate, or transfer.

Diedrea says she continued to enroll in classes through the years as a way to stay connected, however tentatively, to her dream of going to college. "I was in a situation where I would start the class and drop the class, start and drop, start and drop because I couldn't afford the books. I needed to work to afford to pay for my books. It was difficult to do both work and school. And have a daughter," Diedrea explained. "When a test or a project came due, and you need the book and you can't afford the book, then it's all for nothing. It's very disheartening and very discouraging."

Diedrea laments that she had nobody in her circle of friends and family at SDCC who could guide her.

"I felt like one of those people who had fallen through the cracks," she explains. Diedrea began to think that perhaps she wasn't a fit for SDCC or even college itself.

Then by chance in 2006, Diedrea found what she had been seeking. As part of a vocational rehabilitation program, she enrolled at nearby Grossmont Community College, where she completed an Emergency 911 Certification class. Before class and during breaks, she chatted with the Grossmont staff. "I talked to people who worked in various departments—Financial Aid, Admissions and Records, Counseling and EOPS (Extended Opportunity Programs and Services). They were very friendly. They wanted to help," Diedrea said. "It was a whole different atmosphere. It was positive, uplifting, and it made me want to work as hard as I did."

Although Grossmont was further from her home, two busses and a trolley ride away, Diedrea re-enrolled in the spring of 2007.

At Grossmont, she learned she was eligible to receive grants, other financial assistance and specialized counseling through EOPS, a program that provides support for educationally disadvantaged students. Diedrea suffers from a degenerative arthritic condition requiring her to use a power chair to get around. Through the Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS), she found mobility assistance and was eventually diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a condition she had long suspected. Another program utilized by Diedrea is called New Horizons. Located in the same office of the EOPS program, New Horizons provided assistance to single parents, displaced homemakers or single pregnant women. From this program she was able to receive much needed textbook support, transportation

funds, parking permits, and counseling made available to each student that entailed academic, career, and personal counseling. Diedrea learned that the same programs had been available at SDCC all along, but she was never aware of them.

"Once all the different resources were made available to me, I was like 'I'm in the right place. I've got to do better.' "

She enrolled in 14 units and in the end earned a 3.5 grade point average. "I had received counseling and that's when I started getting serious. The difference was the quality of the appointment." For example, according to Diedrea, counselors at Grossmont will spend an hour with a student if the purpose of the session is to create an education plan, a course plan for transfer students. "If it's something serious like that, the counselors want to make sure they have the time to assist you in anything and everything you need," said Diedrea.

"The books are the most expensive things in attending a community college. Even though tuition is very low or you qualify for the BOG waiver [Board of Governors Fee Waiver, which waives enrollment fees to eligible students] that doesn't mean a hill of beans if you cannot afford to pay for your books," Diedrea explains. At Grossmont, she was especially thankful for the professors who announced in class that one copy of the course textbook would be on loan in the library should a student be unable to afford to purchase the book.

Diedrea feels strongly that at Grossmont, the excellent dissemination of resource information and the welcoming and attentive staff were invaluable. "They helped me be a better student each and every step of the way," she said. "There is no better community college than Grossmont College."

After years of struggle and perseverance, Diedrea finally made it. She earned an AA in University Transfer Studies with a Major in Theatre from Grossmont. In the fall of 2011, she transferred to San Diego State University, where she is now a communications major.

Today, she has a simple yet heartfelt message for legislators: "We're going to forever have a budget crisis, but you need to invest in your people. Nobody should have to go through what I've gone through. 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."

Student Success Indicator: Knowledge of, and access to, critical student support services. Diedrea's story illustrates the importance of support services for capable students facing real life challenges. Some colleges serve a greater proportion of high-needs students but, comparing colleges of similar size and demographics, some are more effective at closing the achievement gap for underrepresented minority students.* Best practices should be identified and shared systemwide.

SOURCE: *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

Michelle Ko

Returning to train for a new career, trying to stand out in a system overwhelmed with students. (Glendale)

Following a ten-year career in human resources at an investment firm in Sacramento, California, 35-year-old Michelle Ko is currently a California community college student. After deciding that the cut-throat corporate environment wasn't for her—and spending several years unemployed—she is transitioning careers. In the fall of 2010, she enrolled at Glendale Community College (GCC) to pursue a nursing degree.

Michelle grew up the younger of two sisters in the suburbs of the Northern California city of San Jose. Both of her parents were born in South Korea and immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1960s. Michelle's parents owned a liquor store and managed to send her and her older sister, Sue, to private schools for most of their primary education. Michelle's parents believed strongly in advancement through education.

In the last semester of her senior year in high school, Michelle participated in "Project Advance," a program that enabled her to complete college credits at San Jose Community College while still in high school. For several years after high school, she worked part-time and spent the rest of her time at DeAnza College and American River Community College. Lacking clear academic goals, Michelle determined that school was not the natural course for her and decided to join the work force full-time instead.

After a ten-year absence from school, Michelle found herself at GCC pursuing a nursing degree, a high-demand career field which could represent long-term financial stability. Michelle's first day at GCC was unlike her earlier college experience. She recalls with awe the intensity of the first day of her Math 101 class. About 60 students overwhelmed the small classroom, all hoping to add the class. In the end, 25 were wait-listed and the rest turned away. With amazement, she recalls arriving at school an hour and a half before the start of class to find that the only available parking was on a residential street a mile and a half from campus. Even though she had purchased a campus parking pass, she was unable to park in the school's

parking lots because they—like many classes—were full to capacity. All of the lessons Michelle learned climbing the corporate ladder did not prepare her for the challenges of being a community college student and what happens when student demand overwhelms the resources. Many students are unable to enroll in classes they need because they are full. Students soon discover that the only "solution" is a deep and abiding flexibility on their part.

At GCC, the registration process is handled online, approximately five weeks prior to the start of the semester. Each student is assigned a priority registration date; this is the specific date and time that the student can first enroll in classes. Registration dates are assigned according to the number of units a student has completed; the more units a student has, the earlier the registration date and the better the odds of getting the needed classes.

As a new student last year, Michelle had no applicable units because the credits she earned at San Jose City College, DeAnza and American River had expired. Because of this, she was among the last group of students eligible to enroll in classes. Her registration date was very late in the schedule—about a week and a half before the start of classes.

Ultimately, Michelle's course load was determined by default. As soon as the schedule of classes was published, Michelle filled her online basket with every session of every class that would count toward her degree. At the appointed day and time, she logged on and waited, checking back daily on her enrollment status. As the classes filled up, she removed them from her basket. The final courses remaining in her basket at the end of the registration period constituted her schedule for the semester. She had started the registration period with two dozen classes, hoping to get six. She ended with four.

In theory, this system of prioritization should work because newer students like Michelle have a broader range of requirements to fulfill compared to more senior students, and many of these requirements are core classes, i.e., English 101, Math 101, History 101. Since every student is required to take core classes, a class like Math 101 may have as many as eight sessions offered per semester. But, as Michelle found with her math class, core classes are severely impacted.

Now only two semesters into her tenure at GCC, Michelle expects that the problem of enrollment will only compound further as she moves away from needing the core requirements to the fewer, more specialized classes required for her program. For courses like microbiology or anatomy, there may only be three or four sessions offered per semester. Naturally, she is bracing herself for being waitlisted. "There will be classes like my science classes 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 groveling," she said.

Like many other students, Michelle thought a solution to the problem of impacted classes would be to take the classes at other community college campuses. What she found is that there are layers upon layers of uncertainties that make this a challenging option. To

begin with, most community colleges in the region face the same problem—demand for classes outweighs class availability—so the pastures are no greener and just as crowded elsewhere.

If Michelle wants to complete Glendale Community College's nursing program, she cannot take more than half of her courses at other California community colleges. Michelle and her peers find this restriction particularly frustrating because the colleges are all part of the same system and course work should therefore be compatible and equitable.

Another dimension of the problem is the question of transferability and the inconsistency of how courses are named. Based on course catalogs and the schedule of classes, it is difficult to determine with certainty if, for instance, History 10A at Pasadena City College is the equivalent of Glendale Community College's core history requirement, History 101, and if it is transferable. Is Philosophy 1 the same as Philosophy 15, and is it transferable? Should a student wish to confirm transferability, the only way to do so with any degree of certainty is to meet with a counselor. Yet in-person meetings are often impractical or impossible to schedule because of the sheer volume of students, the high student-to-counselor ratio, and the long wait in scheduling meetings with counselors.

As an example, one of Michelle's friends was assessed at the level of Math 101. After trying unsuccessfully for two semesters to enroll—that's one full academic year—her friend opted to take two equivalent but slower paced classes, Math 101A and Math 101B, over the course of two semesters rather than wait another year.

For working students, scheduling is another major obstacle to completing needed classes. Class times can often conflict with work schedules. "Many students can't believe I carried 14 units a semester," Michelle said. She is fortunate because she does not have to work while attending school. Her sister generously supports her through this transition, so she has the flexibility to take classes offered at odd times, classes that would be incompatible for someone with a part-time job. Last semester, she was on a dawn-to-dusk schedule, with classes starting as early as 8:30 a.m. and ending as late as 10:30 p.m., with one- to two-hour breaks in between. Michelle observes that it is hard for a student to work and go to school: "How many jobs can one get where you can say 'I can come in for two hours in the morning, and two hours at night?' "

One of Michelle's chief concerns is the high ancillary cost of attending community college. Textbooks are a prime example of this. In the case of Chemistry 101, Michelle's textbooks cost more than the cost of the class—about $200 while the cost of the five-unit class was only $130. Reselling used textbooks is a way for students to recoup some of the money spent on books. Around the college's bookstore, one can find students pacing the parking lot peddling their used books and advertising their wares with handmade cardboard signs like, "Anthropology 103 book for sale," "Spanish 102," "American History," etc.

In the two semesters Michelle has been a student at GCC, she has seen two fee increases. "Our tuition has gone up. Our parking has gone up. Even things like our I.D. cards have gone up," said Michelle. The costs add up. She had planned to take classes year round during the summer and winter intercessions. Yet, this was not to be because the core courses for summer filled before Michelle could enroll. In the meantime, Michelle is seeking work for the summer. She hopes to remain on track and finish the nursing prerequisites in a year's time.

Jay Cortez

The story of long-term college goals deferred due to immediate financial needs. (Los Angeles)

Many community college students in California live financially precarious existences. Work is a matter of survival, and study is a luxury. Community colleges enroll the state's lowest-income students with full-time students having an annual median income of $16,223, with one-fourth having incomes of less than $5,544 per year.[1] The annual federal poverty threshold for an individual is $10,830.

An annual income of $16,223 translates to about $44.45 per day, a painfully meager sum when one factors in the cost of tuition at $26 per unit (soon to increase to $36 per unit), books, transportation, rent, and groceries. Nearly nine in ten of all community college students work. Balancing the immediate rewards of working—namely a paycheck—with the long-term rewards of completing some level of higher education very often presents a conflict to community college students.

"I thought I would go to an Ivy League school," says Jay Cortez. The twenty-five year old grew up among an extended Salvadoran family in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley and was always the bright star—an honor roll student, an academic decathlon competitor, and a talented musician on the clarinet and saxophone. The eldest of two siblings, Jay's mom was a homemaker, and his father owned an automobile repair shop. He seemed destined for greatness. Toward the end of his education at Grant High School, however, the teenager lost interest in school and found his inner rebel instead. His grades plunged as a result, eclipsing his chance to be the star student from Grant High School. Community college became his chance to start again.

Since graduating from high school in 2004, Jay has attended, intermittently, a quintet of community

1 The Foundation for California Community Colleges

colleges throughout the Los Angeles region: Los Angeles Community College, Valley Community College, Pierce Community College, Santa Monica City College, and Antelope Valley College. In the seven years since high school, he has not yet transferred to a four-year institution nor has he earned an associate's degree or trade certification. He is typical of many hard-working community college students whose academic goals are deferred by the lack of financial support and the need to work.

"If people were able to finance their education and focus on that primarily, they would get out of there much faster," says Jay. "Very few students who go part-time cut it." Following a two-year hiatus from school, in the fall of 2009, Jay returned full-time to Los Angeles City College (LACC).

A student's need to work magnifies the impact of every budget cut. In the fall of 2010, Jay was elected LACC's Associated Student Body President. He recalls a budget meeting with the student government, faculty, and top brass where cost-cutting measures were being sought. Eliminating Saturday hours at the school's library was proposed. Many students do not have computers at home, and their only access to computers is at school. The student body responded with outrage to what would be yet another obstacle to their academic goals. Many explained that Saturdays are the only days they have available to work on the computer; during the week, they work days and attend school at night. By the time they get out of class, the library is closed. Their protests worked, and the library remains open on Saturdays for four hours, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

At LACC, the financial aid department is understaffed. "When you say financial aid to a student who goes to community college," Jay says, "it's like you're saying 'DMV.' It's a pain in the butt, and you don't want to go unless you absolutely have to. It's tedious, it's long, it's drawn out, it's confusing."

Jay's first experience with the financial aid department was contentious and frustrating. He had little money to begin with and was counting on the disbursement of an AmeriCorps scholarship in the amount of $4,325 to survive the four-month semester. Following the proper procedures, he applied for the disbursal of the scholarship in the summer, and when school started in September he expected disbursement. It wasn't available, nor was it available the next week or the week after. "I didn't get that money until the end of the semester—December," said Jay.

"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," Jay said. "It's just a mess. They are expected to do a 10-person job with only three people." He gained a better understanding of the impact the budget cuts have upon staffing. Ultimately the students' needs go unmet.

"Being in community college feels like everyone starts out on the mainland and you want to get to this island paradise," he says. "A lot of times it feels like the kids that go to four-year institutions have their nice cruise liners and their yachts—and, yes, it's expensive and all, but it gets them there in comfort. And we're here in a rickety little boat, a little rowboat with holes that we have to patch up and row our way out there. We're all crowded on this boat, trying to stay on so we don't fall off, trying to make it out to this same place, to get

a degree, to get an education, to get a solid career and job. A lot of times, that's exactly what it feels like."

Part of the issue with students being able to help themselves is that they are unaware of resources like emergency loans, or the Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), which provide for book vouchers. "It's like the Animal Burger on the In-N-Out menu," Jay says. "It's available, but if you don't know about it, you can't ask for it." He says that mandatory orientation would help inform students of resources and demystify the college experience overall, but student government has not yet reached a consensus on how to enforce attendance.

In the most dire financial cases, students are homeless. Jay explains that because of this they often sleep on bus benches or couch surf, moving from one friend's couch to another's. In an attempt to do what it could, the student government organized hygiene donation drives, collecting toiletries and assembling kits from the donations for distribution to those in need. The kits were distributed at the student government offices. Jay says that students would linger around the office before mustering the courage to ask for a kit. "It's a difficult topic because they feel so ashamed of it," Jay said. "It's hard to get it out in the open. When you can't communicate, it really breaks down building any real lines to reach out to people."

During last year's Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons, LACC President Dr. Jamillah Moore's office coordinated food drives for the preparation of holiday meals for hungry or homeless students and for the students with nowhere to go. The donations were turned over to Jay, then student body president, and he opened up his home to host the students' holiday meals. "At LACC, the administration is very compassionate and tries to connect with students. There is very little that they don't know about," Jay says.

After the fall 2010 semester, Jay again withdrew from school so that he could work to earn some money. Despite his continued need to work, he will return to LACC in the spring of 2011 to complete the transfer curriculum in public policy for the University of Southern California or Tufts University by the fall of 2012. He needs just two classes to fulfill the transfer requirements.

Student Success Indicator: Earning at least 30 college-level credits. 30 college-level credits is the minimum amount correlated with a significant increase in earnings.* Yet research has shown that only 40% of students achieve this important milestone within 6 years.** Jay's experiences demonstrate the many ways in which students can lose momentum before reaching this marker.

SOURCES: *Marcotte, D.E. (2006). *The Earnings Effect of Education for Community Colleges*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland.
**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

Toni Gomez

Struggling with poverty, while knowing that college is the pathway out of it. (Redding)

For many California students, higher education is a path out of poverty. That is the case for Toni Gomez, 22, from Susanville, California, a small Northern California town that was once a mining and logging boomtown but which now houses two large correctional facilities.

Though her parents are a real estate agent and a contractor, small town life was not always easy for the Gomez family. For much of her youth, the family was on public assistance as her mother battled substance addiction. Despite these hardships, Toni was bright and excelled in school. She was a student in the Gifted and Talented Program (GATE) and an enthusiastic FFA Club member. Toni describes her parents as "hippies" who encouraged learning through curiosity, exploration and entrepreneurialism. The pursuit of higher education was neither discouraged nor encouraged.

After graduating from Lassen High School in 2006, Toni had no plans to attend college. She worked for a year at a church in Vallejo, California, and when it became clear that church work was not her calling, Toni's mom suggested she explore business development classes at Shasta Community College (SCC). While working

full-time at a furniture store, Toni enrolled in a few online courses through SCC.

When she applied for financial aid, her application was selected for "verification," a random audit process intended to protect against fraud. The verification process required that Toni provide copies of her tax return, her parent's tax return, and additional financial documents she had never heard of. The red tape was overwhelming, and Toni simply could not comply. "Neither of my parents had filed taxes in three years. Without their tax return there was no way to verify their income. After a few attempts to contact the Financial Aid Department, I gave up."

A recent study by The Institute for College Access and Success found that students selected for "verification" were 7% less likely to receive the financial aid for which they were eligible than those who were not selected. This was certainly true of Toni. Without financial aid, she could not afford the class fees. She stopped attending and was dropped from all her classes. Her first college semester was a lost one, an unintended consequence of a financial aid safeguard.

Determined to try again, Toni enrolled the following semester. This time, she flourished and thrived. "Eventually, I bought into college. I watched my parents struggle, and I began to see college as the route to a stable future, as the way out of poverty," she says. Her outlook changed, as did her commitment to higher education. She enrolled in college track courses, taking 15 or 16 units per semester. She enrolled during the summer session. Simultaneously, she took online classes at SCC and classroom courses at nearby Lassen Community College (LCC).

But obstacles stemming from the financial aid system persisted. The fall session begins in mid August, but at LCC and at many other colleges, student loans and grants aren't disbursed until October. "That's the frustrating part about the financial aid system, the way it is that it takes them so long to get the students the money that they need," Toni says. "Students are being asked to buy $250 books and supplies for classes, but they don't have any money. If you don't have a textbook in a class, you can't succeed in the class."

Toni admits that she did achieve a B grade in a class even though she never purchased one of the required textbooks. The class was English 1A, and it examined society, community, and culture through food. Actually, she found the course to be very interesting. "Unfortunately one of the books the professor wanted us to read was $66 and I didn't have $66, so I would borrow it after class from a classmate or copy pages or read it in the library. I made it work." Toni says other students do the same: "They are forced to photocopy portions of the book."

Last year, Toni served as LCC's associated student body president. Her office was located in the campus food pantry.

"We have a food pantry at our college because we were concerned that our students were not eating. I think that's the case at a lot of colleges. You'll see students starting food pantries just to make sure students are being fed. Our students are hungry," Toni said. "That's kind of crazy, isn't it? It's weird that we're stepping in to fill that social service."

As a college student, Toni has lived close to the edge of poverty. "The experience of being a student is extremely difficult," Toni says. Once, Toni survived for two months with only $34 in her bank account. She survived by working odd jobs to scrape together cash. She carpooled to school with her neighbor and also depended on food stamps. "The thing about life is

when you run out of money, you don't just fall over and die. You have to keep going. That's a reality that a lot of our students face, especially in August and September when they are waiting on their financial aid checks to come through." Toni has made every effort to connect students to the food stamp program. But for a full-time student to be eligible for food stamps, she or he must work a minimum of 20 hours per week. "There's a little contradiction there," Toni notes.

Toni is currently helping her friend Susan, a single mother of two children, enroll in LCC. Specifically, she helps Susan submit forms and directs her to resources that are available to her: "It's important to tell her that she can get a free bus pass." Other resources like ASSIST.org, an easy-to-use website that shows students how course credits earned at one public California college or university transfer to another public California institution, are indispensible. "It's a great tool that not a lot of students know about," Toni says. "Making students aware of the resources that are available to them has been the biggest way to help them through the road blocks."

LCC also has a "10-step enrollment" process that Toni prefers to call "a 10-step hazing process." A prospective student must enroll in person, and no part of the application can be completed online. Between the admissions documents, the financial aid documents, Board of Governors (BOG) Fee Waiver (waives tuition fees for low-income students), and the long lines, students are easily overwhelmed by the process. Many times students who work simply do not have free the time it takes to complete the process. "I have seen students who get frustrated with the system, and they have just walked away. They say 'I can get a full-time job. I can get $10 an hour—why would I use my time to do this?' It's important to recognize that time spent in class for community college students is a trade off. They could be somewhere else making money, so when we put these roadblocks in front of them, we're telling them that they should go work because it is going to be more profitable for them," said Toni.

This fall, Toni will transfer to Mills College, an all-women's college up the road in Oakland, California, to pursue a degree in public policy. She looks forward to the rigorous academic environment and to upper division courses like Economics and Education, even if she doesn't look forward to purchasing the textbook for the course.

Student Success Indicator: Clear communication to students of financial aid options available to them. Toni didn't have any of her own financial resources to contribute to paying for college. Many face similar situations, but do not know what their options are. In 2007-08, an estimated 500,000 community college students were likely eligible for federal or institutional grant aid but did not apply for it.*

SOURCE: *The Institute for College Access & Success (March 2010). *Financial Aid Facts at California Community Colleges*. Oakland, CA.