

Open Letter in Response to CCCCCO "A Vision for Success"

October 3, 2017

Dear SRJC Faculty,

This summer, the Chancellor's Office published a document entitled, ["A Vision for Success: Strengthening California's Community Colleges to meet California's Needs"](#) (henceforth, the Vision). If approved this month by the Board of Governors, the Vision will dramatically reshape the mission and administration of California Community Colleges (CCCs).

According to the Vision, California's economic prosperity depends upon increasing the ranks of college-educated Californians, both because more Californians need degrees in order to ensure their own economic security, and also because California's employers need more employees with degrees in order to staff positions in emerging industries. In the face of such pressures, one might hope that the Chancellor's Office would call for a vast expansion of our CCC system, granting more scholarships to students, opening new locations, and investing in top-notch faculty. Alas, the Vision takes a different tack, and proposes meeting these needs within current budgets simply by adopting a sweeping shift of focus: we must get more students in and through our community colleges as quickly and cheaply as possible. The working assumption of the document is more degrees equals more prosperity (even if in the process we change what is involved in getting a degree). The authors acknowledge that their proposal represents a significant departure from the intentions and structure of California Master Plan for Higher Education (1960), and they justify this departure by noting that economic times have changed. We apparently can no longer afford to indulge in traditional methods that made California's community colleges the envy of the world.

To reflect California's new, laser-focused commitment to increasing completion while lowering costs per student, the Vision adopts six goals we are supposed to achieve within five to ten years:

1. Increase by at least 20 percent the number of CCC students annually who acquire associates degrees, credentials, certificates, or specific skill sets that prepare them for an in-demand job.
2. Increase by 35 percent the number of CCC students system-wide transferring annually to a UC or CSU.
3. Decrease the average number of units accumulated by CCC students earning associate's degrees, from approximately 87 units to 79 units.
4. Increase the percent of exiting CTE students who report being employed in their field of study from 60 percent to 69 percent.
5. Reduce equity gaps by 40 percent within 5 years and for good within 10 years.
6. Reduce regional achievement gaps for good within 10 years.

The Vision then calls upon the Board of Governors to use these goals to aggressively monitor and intervene in CCC operations in order to ensure the Vision's success.

However well intentioned the Vision may be, we believe it is deeply flawed, and we worry that it will undermine SRJC's ability to offer high-quality, meaningful education to the citizens of our county. Our judgment on this matter is grounded in values and reasoning that, we believe, most members of our community would embrace. We are acutely aware that the themes of the Vision resonate with many of

our colleagues in certain disciplines, and indeed, some disciplines wouldn't be negatively affected. But our courses, programs and students are diverse, and there is no doubt, in our judgment, that the Vision will have a negative impact on certain disciplines and student populations, and diminish the quality of our system as a whole. So, we're writing to explain our reasoning. We hope you will take a chance to give this matter your attention, and, if you agree with our assessment, we hope you will join us in our vocal opposition.

Intelligent Goals

Many species of animal are intelligent, and engage in *means-end* reasoning, which involves figuring out how to achieve a fixed goal. Humans do this very well, of course. But we also do something beyond this, namely, *open-ended reasoning*, which involves reasoning about which goals are worth pursuing and why. We are at our most human when we understand the value of our goals themselves, and when we establish means of communicating and sharing our purposes with others.

Open-ended reasoning is a crucial part of adult life. To thrive in this world, we must be competent not just at reaching set goals, but in deciding, in a rational and often collaborative manner, which goals are worthy of pursuing. This conversation about the Vision is a perfect example of open-ended reasoning. The authors of the Vision hope to convince us – faculty, staff, administrators, taxpayers, students – that the six goals it identifies for CCCs *should be* the primary goals governing how our institutions are designed. Our response to the Vision, articulated here, is an effort to convince you of the opposite.

Answering questions about *what our goals should be* requires critical thinking skills, experience, patience, knowledge, imagination, inspiration, empathy, and creativity, not to mention sophisticated communication skills. It takes, in short, what many would call *wisdom*. Traditionally, the development of wisdom has been a central pillar of higher education.

An institution structured around wisdom does not encourage students to take aimless and unguided strolls through a cafeteria of options.¹ Nor does it try to shepherd its students along prescribed routes to success.² Rather, it engages students in an *active, critical, and creative* process, in which discipline experts help expose students to the promise and value of diverse fields of study and technical skills, while continuously encouraging them to investigate how they might gain from, contribute to, combine, and help expand those fields. Santa Rosa Junior College has been doing this well, though not perfectly, for a century. SRJC's mission statement reflects our commitment to education that engages our capacities for open-ended reasoning and growth:

SRJC passionately cultivates learning through the creative, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, aesthetic and ethical development of our diverse community.

Unfortunately, the Vision threatens to undermine this mission, in ways we explain below.

¹ This 'cafeteria' metaphor is commonly used by proponents of the Vision to capture how community colleges supposedly function now. We believe it is a faulty metaphor, but in any case, it certainly does not capture what we are advocating for.

² This is what the Vision, with its adoption of guided pathways, is attempting to achieve.

How the Vision Threatens SRJC's Mission

The structure of CCCs, and the college experience itself, as dictated by the Vision, will entirely neglect the importance of helping our students develop wisdom and find purpose. The superstructure it imposes on CCCs flat out discourages open-ended reasoning. It demands instead that students pick their destinations at the outset of their educational journey, that they remain fixed on their goal for the duration of their education, and that various mechanisms be instituted to confine them to their track. It literally categorizes *as undesirable* the essential human process of refining and expanding our purposes in the light of new knowledge. It demands that faculty know and promise the unknowable – namely, how students will change and grow as a result of their exposure to new ideas and mastery of new skills. It requires us to design pathways in which *we decide for students* how to fruitfully combine our course offerings, foreclosing on the possibility that students might discover pathways we ourselves couldn't see. It discounts as metrics for success any outcomes that are not quantifiable in numerical terms (happiness, fulfillment, levels of democratic engagement, etc.). And it makes it our primary responsibility to keep students on track, rather than to teach students how to motivate themselves along tracks they've designed for themselves.

For all these reasons, the Vision will not, we aver, produce well-educated citizens nor a well-educated workforce. And quality of education—excellent scholarship, development of high level critical thinking skills, range and diversity of knowledge, a “holy curiosity” to use Einstein's expression—is nowhere addressed in the reverse engineering feat the Vision imposes upon us. In fact, quality education is everywhere undermined.

The Vision's Methods

To illustrate the details of how the vision threatens our mission, we here examine a number of specific prescriptions the Vision makes for CCCs, including reducing units to completion, reverse engineering curriculum to serve the Vision's narrow understanding of success, diminishing faculty's role in shared governance, selling equity short, and institutionalizing perverse incentives.

Discouraging Exploration

For a document that claims to be aggressively student-centered, the Vision has a lamentably impoverished understanding of what is good for students, and more broadly, for human beings. This can be seen by noting that the metrics – the measures that actually determine how money gets spent and which programs are supported – are silent regarding the importance of personal growth, empowerment, curiosity, excellence, exploration, and wisdom. Instead, the metrics prioritize maximizing output (degree achievement) while minimizing cost (units earned). In addition, the passages that do address a students' right to exploration pay it only the most tepid lip service:

“While some amount of exploration is part of the education process, excessive accumulation of units is frequently a sign of trouble: it can mean...[students] lacked sufficient guidance to enroll in the right courses or find a clear academic direction in the first place. Excess units create

inefficiencies and drive up costs for both the student and California taxpayers...[and they] crowd out and slow down other students who need those same courses” (p. 11).

The authors are certainly right that extra units ‘can’ be a sign of trouble. But let’s examine this generalization a bit more critically. A sign of trouble for whom? Yes, extra units cost taxpayers money, and so are presumably trouble for the taxpayer (as long as you assume that the taxpayer doesn’t care about funding rich educational opportunities). But extra units are only *sometimes* a problem for the student. Many students take extra classes deliberately for all kinds of good reasons. Extra classes often lead to extra knowledge and skills. Is this something a supposedly student-centered vision should be against? Of course not. And yet, reducing units to completion is one of the Vision’s key goals. Let’s be clear: The drive to reduce units has nothing to do with student success, and everything to do with minimizing costs. There might be a legitimate argument to be made that, given resource constraints, we simply *must* ration our educational goods. But let’s not try to dress this sad fact up in ribbons and pretend that such rationing is good for students, good for our college, or good for our society. It is not.

Reverse Engineering Curriculum

Having committed to the goal of reducing units to completion, the Vision devises a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of keeping students on track that includes reducing choices (p. 21), and insisting that all (not some) courses be “designed as part of a coherent pathway with a clear outcome, either transfer or a career outcome” (p. 22). This is an absurd demand, one that will not only waste tons of faculty and staff hours, but that is doomed to fail in its own purported goal. Comedian, movie star and playwright Steve Martin got his BA in philosophy. Would anyone plying the reverse engineering program of the Vision have made that connection? How many connections between a “specific” job or career and disciplines like philosophy, humanities, religion, ethnic studies, woman’s studies, sociology, art, or history ARE there? Myriads of mostly unanticipated ones.

In all of this, the Vision’s authors seem to miss a basic point: we cannot engineer certainty into an uncertain world, as appealing as such a thought may be. The best we can do for our students is to tell them the truth: there is no guarantee that any course or degree will get you anything in particular. What education—real education—will do, generally, is give you the best chance possible of making the best of whatever situation you happen to find yourself in down the road. Of course, the narrower we make our students’ educational experiences, the less this will be true.

Diminishing Role of Faculty

The Vision’s authors write, “Moving forward, education leaders need to meet across education systems much more frequently and in more depth, and with more personal dedication to the task. This is true at both the state and regional levels” (p. 43). Sure, of course. But the context surrounding this statement identifies the task as “to reverse engineer California’s public education system to make it work better for students, even if that means giving up a piece of turf or control.” (p. 42). Who is in view that needs to lose turf and control? “In a system that relies heavily on shared governance, it can grind progress to a standstill” (p. 37). Aha! Shared governance is the culprit! “Compared to community college systems in other states (and the other public higher education sectors in California), the CCC system is largely

decentralized, with light oversight from the state or system level and greater oversight at the local level” (p. 37). So we need less shared governance and less local autonomy.

The cruelest good thing the Vision says is that we need more full time faculty (p. 27). An important component of student success is more contact with more available, and less haggard faculty. The way to achieve that is more full time faculty, which means less reliance on adjunct faculty. What are the prospects of this? As a system, and in local budget discussions we still rely on the FON (faculty obligation number), a number arrived at by following the Chancellor’s office formula for determining our institution’s minimum obligation for employing full-time faculty. But the FON is a poor measure of student-to-full-time faculty contact, because it doesn’t really even measure that. In AB 1725 (1988), the ideal goal of 75/25 full-time/part-time ratio was set which *is* a measure of full-time-to-student contact, as it measures the number of sections taught by “contract” faculty as opposed to adjunct faculty. In the name of student success we should be at 75/25 or higher. (At last count SRJC’s ratio was between 64 and 65 % full-time to between 36 and 35% part-time.) This is the elephant in the room. The Vision acknowledges this elephant and drops it. If the Vision were serious about the need to increase the ranks of full-time faculty, doing so would be among its stated goals and metrics.

‘Fast Food’ Equity

Like many of our colleagues, we both chose to teach at a community college because we specifically wanted to make our careers at a public institution that serves all of society rather than just a select few. We didn’t feel comfortable keeping the treasures of our respective disciplines locked in offices and classrooms that only the country’s richest and most privileged citizens could access. Our commitment to equity literally brought us here. As such, we are as concerned as the Vision’s authors are about the persistent achievement gaps among our students. And we applaud, in theory, the Vision’s bold target for equity – a complete closing of achievement gaps within 10 years.

However, it is important to ask, in the face of such ambition, whether the means of achieving such a goal are worth the ends. For, while the equity goals in the vision are quantitatively ambitious, they are also qualitatively shallow. Some of our colleagues have used the phrase ‘fast food education’ to capture the likely outcome of trying to force the equity ‘needle’ to move too fast. For if, in an effort to get more underserved students through more quickly, we lower our standards or otherwise diminish the quality of what we offer, we won’t have achieved true equity at all.

This is not to suggest that there are not tangible things we can do to close equity gaps *without* lowering our standards. We applaud the curricular innovations of dedicated faculty that are working hard to identify and remove arbitrary and unfair barriers to success, while still eliciting excellence from their students. We are highly skeptical, however, that this work alone – even with the full support of the Chancellor’s Office behind it – will be enough to get anywhere close to completely closing achievement gaps. Which leaves one to wonder, will we also start removing *non-arbitrary* quality barriers, barriers intrinsic to the difficult work of becoming well-educated, to make up the difference?

As just one troubling example, consider the Vision’s endorsement of a ‘hold harmless’ policy:

“The idea is simple: when students do what is expected of them at the sending institution, the

receiving institution should honor it and deliver on what the student is expecting. . . . As a bold example, 12th graders who meet the eligibility standards of UC and CSU (i.e. completing the A-G course pattern and achieving a minimum grade point average) should be automatically eligible for transfer-level courses when they enroll at a community college. If a clear pattern of under-preparedness is apparent, that indicates a need for the college to work urgently with its local K-12 partners to align expectations. Students, however, should be able to access collegiate courses as expected and services to help them catch up” (25).

So, the underprepared student must be allowed to register for transfer-level classes. What does this mean for the faculty members teaching those classes and all the other students in that class that are actually prepared? The Vision seems to think that ‘extra services to catch them up’ will be sufficient to ensure that the instructor won’t have to dilute the content of their course or move at a slower pace, but it provides no evidence that any such magic-bullet services are forthcoming. And, of course, at our own college many of the services that may have provided some of this type of support are being pared back, because of budgetary tough times. What happens when such students are not saved by these ‘extra services’? The faculty must choose whether to fail the student or disingenuously pass them along, so as to keep completion numbers on track. What’s the likely outcome of this? Failing the student won’t help achieve student equity; nor will passing them, despite the veneer of success.

Perverse Incentives

Faculty can usually tell the difference between students who are motivated primarily by a desire to learn, and those who are instead motivated by the desire to get a good grade in the class. The former ask questions like, “Can you explain the difference between how a utilitarian and a Kantian would approach euthanasia?” The latter ask, “Do I need to understand utilitarianism for the test?” The former ask, “In my paper I want to explain why I think free will is compatible with determinism, but I am having a hard time expressing it. Can you help?” The latter ask, “What do you want me to say in my opening paragraph?”

It does not surprise us, given the pressures that many of our students face, that they are laser-focused on their GPAs. But we enter dangerous territory whenever we begin treating *the means* of measuring success (in this case, good grades) as success itself. Just as getting the right blood pressure reading is *a measure* of good health, but not the purpose of becoming healthy, achieving good grades is a *measure* of well-educated individuals, not the purpose of becoming well-educated.

What happens when we fail to keep this crucial distinction in mind, and instead frame our success in terms of high performance on our measurement metrics? An instructive example is the now abandoned No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Not only did NCLB force K-12 teachers to prioritize test preparation over genuine educational experiences and condition students to think that the only important knowledge is that which will be on the test, it also spurred a number of cheating scandals in which schools, desperate to keep their funding, falsified or otherwise manipulated test data to try to meet the standards. It was a textbook case of perverse incentives.

Unfortunately, the Vision’s authors seem either unconcerned or unaware that the framework they are rolling out puts similar perverse pressures on CCCs. Just as NCLB defined success as moving the

needle on test scores, the Vision defines success as moving the needle on completion rates. It thereby rewards faculty who lower their standards, even to the point of faking success, and it teaches students that the only knowledge worth their time is the minimal knowledge they need to execute their already minimized education plans.

The risk of incentivizing the wrong sorts of changes is especially dire for the CCCs given that most of our ‘failures’ on the Vision’s selected metrics result from forces beyond our control. The Vision pretends to acknowledge these factors, characterizing them as “substantive grievances,” such as a) the failure of the K-12 system to prepare students, b) the underfunding of our colleges, c) the inadequacy of financial aid, and d) the role and responsibility of the students themselves in their lack of success (p. 36). It even makes the helpful suggestion that colleges and governing boards “pursue a supportive approach by acknowledging the fatigue and anxiety that many faculty, staff and administrators feel, by limiting and consolidating the burdens placed on faculty by burgeoning state and local initiatives, and by freeing up faculty from non-classroom obligations that are not productive toward helping students meet their goals.” (p. 37). But the very next sentence pushes past these crucial points with, “At the same time, the CCC system should embrace ambitious performance goals that signal a real sense of urgency and commitment,” after which, no more is said regarding how the Vision will help mitigate these obstacles.

In short, the Vision more or less dismisses these ‘grievances’ as excuses faculty are using to justify our laziness. The implication is that we could, if only we had enough gumption, bring a generation of underprepared, overworked, economically insecure students up to speed within just a couple of semesters and within current budgetary constraints. The Vision makes it clear that *we* will be the ones held responsible if we fail to pull off this feat. Such pressure is unlikely to lead to better educational outcomes for our students, and is more likely to do just the opposite.

Understanding the Rationale Behind the Vision

While drafting this response, we have often found ourselves wondering how our educational leaders could have gone so awry, and have sought clarity by returning to the passages which provide the supposed rationale for their radical new agenda, passages such as:

“The modern day mission of the CCCs was established in 1960 by California’s Master Plan for Higher Education, when upward mobility was more accessible to more people. Now major worldwide forces like automation and globalism have permanently changed our economy and workforce, eliminating many unionized jobs that guaranteed middle-class wages but didn’t require any college. Today’s students face a very different job market to their counterparts in 1960. Now more than ever, students need quality higher education to penetrate those sectors of the job market that offer secure employment and wages sufficient to support a family” (p. 5).

“Several research organizations have attempted to quantify California’s “degree and certificate gap”—meaning the projected shortfall between the number of educated workers needed and the number that California’s institutions are expected to produce. Estimates of the gap vary due to different starting assumptions, but there is widespread agreement that California’s public education system is substantially behind the curve in meeting future demand for educated

workers. The Public Policy Institute of California anticipates a gap of 1.1 million bachelor's degrees by 2030" (p. 11).

What emerges from these passages is what we will call the 'lifeboat vision' of community colleges. According to this vision, CCCs are portrayed as lifeboats that students must board in an effort to escape the sinking ship of America's once strong middle class. The lifeboats should have as their primary goal delivering graduates to the supposedly sturdy shores of 21st-century employment. On these shores, waiting for the arrival of said graduates are the employers of the State of California, desperate and short-handed, ready to employ graduates with rewarding jobs that pay well. But, sadly, community colleges are failing abysmally in their lifeboat function both because only 48% of the students who board these lifeboats actually make it to the shore (p. 10), and those who do so are disproportionately white and affluent (pp. 12 - 13).

Those in the thrall of the lifeboat vision portray objections to their ambitious improvement goals as heartless and even sometimes racist. They believe that obstructionist faculty, with our own secure and unionized jobs, simply fail to appreciate the plight of our students, and that we continue to insist irrationally, cruelly, that we will not deliver students to economic prosperity unless they first master algebra or memorize our favorite Shakespearean sonnet (neither of which, we are continuously reminded, their future employers demand). Are they right?

We do not deny that community colleges can and do rescue people from bad circumstances; indeed, we celebrate this fact. Nor do we deny that economic trends have left many young people desperate for a lifeline into the middle class. What we object to is a Vision that reduces *all* or even *most* of our work to an economic rescue mission. The Vision is now demanding that all the boats in our impressive fleet – fishing schooners, ocean liners, caravels, research vessels, cargo ships, kayaks, aircraft carriers, rowboats, gondolas, etc. – stop whatever they are doing and instead start plucking students from the water and delivering them as quickly as possible to the arms of benevolent employers.³ Any vessels that prove ill-suited for such a task must be decommissioned and retired.

What is lost when we conceive of our students not as full, human, open-ended reasoners, entitled to a rich, adventurous, and wisdom-centered education, and imagine them instead as shipwreck victims, entitled only to the bare minimum required to get them to the shore? We consider the following example illustrative.

The Chancellor's Own Path to Success

In his commencement speech at Santa Rosa Junior College in May 2017, shortly before the Vision was published, Chancellor Oakley seemed to positively embrace the open-ended function of community colleges, citing his own success story as evidence. He said, "But you know what the beauty of community colleges is? You can keep coming back until you figure it out. And I finally figured it out. And it was the faculty at Golden West College that helped me figure it out." But it is precisely the space to "figure it out" that the Vision, laboring within a lifeboat framework, takes away from the

³ One of the unexamined assumptions of the Vision is that all these jobs we are preparing students for are jobs that will allow students to live rich, full lives.

community college. Oakley, like most college-educated adults, didn't know when he started college what he wanted to do with his life, what he was good at, how he could contribute, etc. It is something he *discovered* along the way.

Chancellor Oakley went on to describe formative experiences with two chemistry professors. Chemistry was the second of three different majors he eventually pursued, and didn't complete that pathway. These chemistry professors shaped his life, one pleasant but challenging and confidence building, the other discouraging and gruff. The latter teacher "pissed me off," said Oakley, because he told the young Eloy that he wasn't going to make it, and to drop the class. Later a counsellor convinced him to change majors again and get out of chemistry. The counsellor was the wife of the chemistry professor that made him mad. He finally ended up on a pathway that got him transferred in three years. He says, ". . . the point is that both the experience I had with Dr. Phil Bernard that filled me with confidence, and the experience I had with Dr. Stan Winter, which made me question whether or not I belonged in college, shaped my life. So you have to take every one of those experiences and use it to keep pushing you forward."

This is good stuff. But these experiences are exactly what the Vision is a blueprint to obliterate.

A Mission Worth Fighting For

We are well aware of how much anxiety our students feel as they look towards an increasingly disrupted global economy defined by stark economic inequality, a withering social safety net, and the erosion of democratic institutions. As parents and as citizens and educators, we feel it, too. What, we ask, is the wise response to this anxiety?

The Vision suggests a narrowing of our purposes. It prioritizes the economic values of our institution above all others, and suggests we redesign everything to maximize only those.

In opposition to this *redesigning*, we propose a *reinvestment* in everything that has made us valuable to California so far, as articulated in our college's mission statement: the creative, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, and ethical development of our diverse community. We are grateful to be a part of an institution that affirms the importance of these extremely valuable (and increasingly rare) treasures. Let us not, in a moment of panic, accept the false narrative that economic forces require us now to throw these treasures overboard.

Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,

Eric Thompson & Alexa Forrester
Philosophy, Humanities, and Religion Department
Santa Rosa Junior College