

California Community Colleges Face Funding Challenges as COVID Relief Funds Dry Up

A controversial California law that requires community colleges to spend at least half their budget on instructional costs is resurfacing as COVID emergency relief funds for higher education dry up.

The law, known as the “Fifty Percent Law,” is beloved by faculty members who say it prioritizes smaller classes and full-time instructors. However, many administrators argue that it prevents them from funding other vital programs, including food and housing support to meet students' basic needs, new technology, and advising.

“It pits staff and administration against faculty, which is what we don’t want,” said Kindred Murillo, a longtime California community college administrator who recently retired. “We want everybody working together for the benefit of students.”

The two sides have debated the funding model for over a decade, but growing financial pressures have injected new urgency into the discussion.

“We’ve heard from colleges for many years, but especially more recently, that the law can be a constraint in meeting their students’ genuine obligations and needs,” said David O’Brien, the California Community Colleges’ vice chancellor for government relations.

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In some ways, the pandemic allowed a temporary appeasement of the dispute. While it brought more attention and demand to community colleges’ noninstructional programs, it also provided emergency relief funds exempted from the Fifty Percent Law. That meant college leaders could invest in expanding student wraparound services while upholding the law and maintaining instructional funding.

However, the spending deadline for federal COVID relief funds passed in June, and state provisions will dry up in the next two years. This will create new hardships for community colleges, as they can no longer rely on emergency relief funds to support noninstructional programs.

“The basic needs coordinator has to be an identified staff member at each college responsible for coordinating all the basic needs efforts, but that again counts against the Fifty Percent Law,” O’Brien said. “That’s somebody whose salary will be considered as an administrator.”

Administrators argue that the original law didn’t account for all the social services colleges are called on to provide today. They say that the law is antiquated and hinders colleges from meeting the needs of their students.

“All those expenditures, which are needed and required for student success, are hamstrung by this law,” said Larry Galizio, president and CEO of the Community College League of California.

In a state where 35 percent of community college attendees are first generation and 64 percent are classified as “economically disadvantaged,” support for basic life needs is becoming a standard expectation.

Some administrators have suggested that the Fifty Percent Law could be updated to include more nonclassroom staff. However, faculty representatives worry that any changes to the law, especially those made without adjusting the percentage set aside for instruction, will infringe on teaching and lead to administrative bloat.

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The state Legislature is auditing 10 community college districts’ compliance with the Fifty Percent Law. The results of the audit are expected to come out sometime next year.

The debate over the Fifty Percent Law will continue as community colleges grapple with the challenges of funding noninstructional programs without emergency relief funds.

Don’t be a silent ninja! Let us know your thoughts in the comment section below.