

Dan Walters: It's time to revisit outdated Master Plan for Higher Education

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As California's population surged from migration and a postwar baby boom in the 1950s, [education](#) and political leaders wrote a Master Plan for Higher Education that envisioned a seamless array of low-cost, high-quality coursework.

[Community colleges](#) would offer two-year degree programs, technical training and lower-division classes for students planning to transfer to four-year schools.

The state college – later university – system would train the teachers, engineers and other professionals that a growing state would need in great abundance.

The [University of California](#) would be the state's engine of research, offer a greater array of baccalaureate fields to top-tier high school graduates, train physicians and lawyers, and provide postgraduate studies up to the doctorate level.

By delineating responsibilities, the master plan's drafters hoped to offer something for everyone who wanted higher education and avoid wasteful duplication and competition.

It worked pretty well for decades, until the state's financial underwriting of colleges began to fade, which pushed costs to students and their families upward, and until demand outstripped supply.

The competition for students and their dollars, not to mention private endowments, that the master had hoped to avoid began to emerge.

A few years ago, the master plan's demarcation lines were breached when the state university system won the right from legislators to offer doctorate degrees in some fields, disturbing master plan purists.

A few days ago, the Senate Education Committee approved a bill that would allow some community colleges to award bachelor's degrees on a pilot basis on the assertion that the four-year systems have been unable to meet demand. It was noted that 20 other states already grant that authority to community colleges.

“We’re in a different time now. California is in a better position now to invest in closing our skills gap,” the author of the bill, Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, said of his third attempt to make the change. “It’s wishful thinking to believe we can meet the challenge of producing another 60,000 bachelor degrees a year without using community colleges, and the longer we delay in using them, the further behind we will fall.”

These and other events indicate that while the master plan may have once served California well, that time has passed and we can no longer afford assumptions that have little relevance to 21st-century reality.

It’s high time, 53 years after the plan’s adoption, that it be seriously revisited. The reconsideration should include weighing the merger of three systems into one, as many other states have done.

The master plan was a hallmark achievement of Gov. Pat Brown, and his son could perform no more important work than making it relevant again.

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