

Performance Based Funding for Community Colleges at the State Board of Education

Testimony of Maria Caruso, AFT-Oregon Local 2277, Portland Community College Federation of Faculty and Academic Professionals

My name is Maria Caruso and I am a full-time faculty member at Portland Community College and Vice-President of AFT-Oregon Local 2277, Portland Community College Federation of Faculty and Academic Professionals.

I am requesting that the rush to establish performance-based funding for community colleges be slowed so that the issues can be considered more carefully. Such models of funding have a history of being abandoned. We need more time to make sounder judgments about them before programs are implemented that harm students and faculty.

Because of my experience teaching at PCC for sixteen years, I have a realistic understanding of the student population. It includes many minority and non-traditional students. Easily half of the students in the basic composition courses that I teach come from one of the following categories: English as a 2nd language learners, veterans of recent wars, students from poverty-income households, students who dropped out of high school, students currently addicted to drugs or alcohol, students who have family histories of criminal neglect or abuse, students currently on parole, students working full time while attempting to earn a degree, students raising families while attempting to earn a degree, students returning to college after many years away, students seeking college classes as enrichment experiences, students with mild, moderate, and severe learning disabilities, etc., etc. The quote unquote normal student, raised by a supportive family, freshly and successfully graduated from high school and ready to speed easily through college in four years, is frankly as rare as hen's teeth. And yet it seems this is the student in mind when outcome/performance based funding is considered.

If a realistic portrait of the student body is not remembered, I'm worried that the State Board of Education or legislature may set goals and fund according to the success of these goals in a way that punishes students who are most in need of education, but do not perform to such stringent standards. I'll quote Maxwell Austin here: "Administrators and faculty have reams of data indicating the link between the social/structural environment from which students come and their academic performance in the classroom. But this outside context is ignored and the faculty members are supposed to turn into Horatio Algiers, heroically laboring to promote learning (or just "student success") with diminished structural and institutional support"

The progress that takes place in community colleges that according to an outcome-based model would be categorized as "unsuccessful" is nevertheless deeply meaningful, and does move the students forward in profound ways, towards ultimate goals of achievement. Without the patience and the realism needed for that to happen, the education we offer suffers, and our communities suffer as a result.

The second point I'd like to make, underpinning my view that performance-based funding will punish and even bar students who need to move forward on a slower, non-mandated time frame, is that performance-based funding is also disrespectful to teachers, and lowers morale. Such plans to reform education do not come from educators, but from outsiders whose judgment of education seems to be that if enough pressure is applied externally, the students will learn faster. It is unrelated to the best practices of educators, who study learning as both an art and a science, and who are the experts on the subject. It ignores their experience and seeks to reward or punish them on a system more in keeping with working for commissions in a pizza parlor or a used car lot than in the complex and delicate world of human education. Expensive, private elementary schools used by elite people who can afford any system they want to educate their children, or expensive private colleges chosen by adults who wish to receive the best possible education, do NOT circumvent best practices and resort to undermining teachers by suggesting that things would improve if financial support was linked to the number of degrees conferred. Teaching is a complex exercise in relating to another human being as they attempt to grow—it cannot happen “better” or more quickly under conditions of increasing pressure put there by those who understand teaching only in terms of its measurable components.

Thank you so much for both your time and your professional respect.