**America's College Promise**

**Guest commentary: Offering free community college is an investment in the nation**

*By Helen Benjamin, guest commentary © 2015 Bay Area News Group*

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Recently, the University of California was widely celebrated by The New York Times for being "California's Upward Mobility Machine," based on effectively enrolling and graduating more middle and low-income students nationally.

The ratio of debt to degree, and the number of students receiving Pell grants, were key factors in the Times' College Access Index, with six UC campuses taking the top seven slots.

While noted in the article, I know this distinction would not be possible without the type of access and high-quality education community colleges provide.

I know the impact access to a college education has for students, especially those most vulnerable to the staggering inequities present in our society.

Our three colleges -- Contra Costa College, Diablo Valley College and Los Medanos College -- serve more than 51,000 students annually, of the 2.1 million students served in California's 113 community colleges.

Although approximately 70 percent of students who enter our colleges are deemed below college-level, these students possess rich cultural backgrounds, resiliency and intelligence that make them some of the most innovative and committed scholars.

Our rigorous programs and courses, coupled with our faculty and staff, help provide the curricular foundation and the belief that the pathway to a baccalaureate degree and rewarding career is obtainable.

Today, the grass-roots Heads Up America movement is calling on our nation to provide two free years of community college for responsible students through America's College Promise.

In California, we know what it means to have the first two years of college at no cost. California was ahead of the curve on that idea. Since we began charging fees in the late 1980s, the cost of education has been underwritten for the neediest among us.

For 30 years, California's political and higher education leaders have worked to keep down the cost of a community college education by supporting the Board of Governors fee waiver, a program that waives community college fees for economically disadvantaged students.

Over the past three decades, the BOG fee waiver has helped more than 5.1 million eligible students pursue their higher education dream.

More than 1 million of California's community college students receive a fee waiver and 66 percent of the units earned are by students whose fees are waived.

For our district, 33 percent of our students received BOG fee waivers in 2014-15 totaling over $13 million of financial assistance.

Recently, I sat in a room filled with community members and noticed how many started their education at a community college. They represented elected officials, community and business leaders, and many others who are actively contributing to making our communities and nation stronger.

What struck me most was that these individuals were direct recipients of tuition-free community college education in California. They are glowing examples of the investment in higher education and the belief that all students should receive the benefit of a higher education.

Approximately one out of three UC students transferred from a community college. This speaks volumes about California's true upward mobility machine. As national leaders deliberate over why a free community college education is an investment in America's future, I offer California as an example and implore Californians to hearken back to earlier days in our history.

The return on investment is remarkable.

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