Another View: CSU needs bold structural change to meet challenges

By William J. Vizzard
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William J. Vizzard, professor emeritus of the CSU, Sacramento, Division of Criminal Justice, is responding to the Aug. 17 commentary, "Sacramento State is working to improve graduation rates."

The recent column by Charles Gossett and Lori Varlotta correctly explained the immediate causes for and responses to graduation rates, but it did not address deeper structural problems.

Four-year graduation can be reasonably assured if the university were to admit only well-prepared, highly qualified students with adequate financial support, and then provide them with excellent counseling for a limited choice of majors. CSU students do not fit this profile. Most need remediation and must work to afford school. Funding cuts have reduced available class sections and advising resources.

The university could eliminate high-cost, low enrollment majors and shift resources to general education and other majors. However, this would face intense opposition from faculty, students and outside interest groups and take several years to accomplish.

It could further tighten the policy on repeating courses and on retention of marginal students, thus opening more space for more successful students. This would increase academic dismissals, require a policy change by the chancellor that would encounter stiff opposition from politicians, interest groups, students and faculty.

It could bar students from taking any class which will not lead directly to graduation and a degree. This would result in many students falling below 12 units required by the federal government for financial aid eligibility, eliminate options for discovering new areas of intellectual interest and produce student and faculty opposition.

It could reduce enrollment by raising entrance standards, but this requires a change in the law governing admissions, would severely impact poor and minority applicants and face opposition by almost everyone. The system could even close a campus and shift the resources.

In short, structural changes could significantly improve the availability of classes, advising and graduation rates. Every change would face strong resistance and impose costs. To make this sort of decision requires unified leadership and management. The CSU system is a massive bureaucracy subject to campus decentralization, faculty governance, union contracts, trustee
policy, restrictive statutes and political intervention. Its management is anything but unified. The repeated cuts in funding have brought it to the brink, but no center of power possesses the authority and political support to pursue controversial and difficult adaptation.

Each year brings minor adjustments allowing the system to get through another year while the core problems grow. The problems facing the CSU are structural and reflect our unwillingness to make hard choices, just as with the rest of California government.

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