Mixed report on community college graduation rates

By Gary Warth
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MiraCosta College graduate Rachel Streets waves as she spots family members in the crowd as she files in with fellow graduates for graduation ceremonies at the college’s Oceanside campus May 20. — Bill Wechter

San Diego — An annual report card on California community colleges shows campuses in San Diego County have better graduation rates than the state average.

However, the local schools also followed a statewide trend that showed a slight dip in the percent of students who graduated with associate degrees, earned certificates or transferred to four-year institutes in the past few years.
Lynn Neault, vice chancellor of student services for the San Diego Community College District, said the report was encouraging for her district.

“But more important, we use this as a tool for continuous improvement,” she said. “We use this as a matrix for indicators to track over time.”

Neault said that although the data shows the district’s three campuses — Mesa, Miramar and San Diego City colleges — are doing better than the state average, there also is room for improvement.

The district is hoping to double the number of students who earn associate degrees in the next seven years and has launched a campaign this week to encourage students to graduate from their college.

Paul Feist, vice chancellor of communications for the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, said the system’s Student Success Task Force recommended the report card as a way of creating more accountability for student outcomes.

Data for the score card representing the 2013-14 school year was released to college districts in January and on Monday was posted on the website scorecard.cccco.edu/scorecard.aspx.

The report compares each college against its own past performance. Data includes the percentage of students who earn a certificate or degree, the persistence rate of students who remain enrolled for three consecutive terms and how many students complete 30 units, the halfway mark for transferring to a four-year institution.

Statewide, about 47 percent of students overall completed a degree, earned a certificate or transferred in the past academic year. The number has slightly fluctuated from five years ago when it was 48 percent.

The overall rate combines students who are prepared for college and students who needed remedial classes while enrolled. Feist said 74.4 percent of students who enroll in community colleges are in need of remedial work.

The differences in the success rate of prepared and unprepared students are some of the more noticeable numbers in the report.

Statewide, the most recent numbers show 70 percent of community college students who were prepared were successful in transferring or earning a degree or certificate, but only 39 percent of unprepared students were successful at the same.

Mesa College’s overall success rate was about 58 percent, the highest in the county but a 3 point drop from the last report. Of those students, 73 percent were prepared for college and 50 percent were unprepared.
Southwestern College had the lowest success rate in the county at 44 percent, making it the only college in the county below the state average. The success rate of students prepared for college was about 62 percent and the success rate for unprepared students was 39 percent.

The school is closed for spring break until April 3 and no one could be reached Tuesday to comment on the report.

At Miramar College in the San Diego Community College District, the overall success rate was 51 percent, a 3 point drop. The success rate for prepared students was 69 percent and the success rate for unprepared students was 43 percent.

In the same district, San Diego City College’s overall success rate was 56 percent, an 8 point drop from the last report. The success rate 65 percent for prepared students and 54 percent for unprepared students.

Jack Beresford, San Diego Community College District director of communications, said the decreases probably were the result of a number of classes that were cut during the time the students in the report were enrolled.

The Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District also was above the state average in student success.

Cuyamaca College’s overall success rate was about 48 percent and Grossmont College’s overall success rate was about 49 percent. Both schools showed a slight drop in completion rates over the past few years.

District communications cirector Anne Krueger said that the downward trend came at a period when about 1,600 courses were cut and acceptance rates decreased at local four-year universities. Krueger said the district has taken several steps to help improve student completion rates.

MiraCosta College had a 55 percent student success rate, down a couple of points from last year but still about 8 points greater than the state average.

Palomar College had a 50 percent overall success rate, a drop of about 2 points over five years.

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