



Assembly Higher Education Committee

Jose Medina, Chair

April 2, 2019

Sacramento, California

**Assembly Bill 130, Higher Education Performance and Accountability Commission
Testimony of Ria Sengupta Bhatt
Interim Executive Director, California Competes**

Good morning, Chair Medina and members of the Committee. Thank you very much for having me. My name is Ria Sengupta Bhatt, and I am the Interim Executive Director for California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy. We are an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit project that focuses on making both the economic and equity-driven case for increasing postsecondary certificate and degree attainment in California.

I am here today in support of Assembly Bill 130, introduced by Assembly Members Low and Eggman, which would establish the Higher Education Performance and Accountability Commission. California Competes has long supported greater oversight and coordination in higher education. The state increasingly faces critical postsecondary challenges including rising costs, untenable capacity constraints, and inequitable outcomes. As a result, college is less accessible and less likely to improve economic mobility for Californians. No segment or governing body is charged with addressing these challenges in whole.

Now, more than at any other time since the Master Plan for Higher Education was chartered, the state needs expert leadership to shepherd our higher education system towards its original mandate: supporting equitable college access and completion for all Californians. Furthermore, the state's significant investment in higher education—12 percent of the general fund expenditure in 2018—demands that the goals and outcomes of our higher education institutions align with a public agenda that reflects the state's priorities for a talented and skilled workforce.

Currently we have a system of parts—the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California—operating in silos with no single entity to help plan, drive, and evaluate statewide efforts to improve student success. A coordinating body would build upon the progress already being made by the segments and accelerate systemic change. Specifically, AB 130 creates the infrastructure to develop statewide higher education goals; to review interagency efforts; and to promote evidence-based policymaking by acting as an information clearinghouse for the Legislature, Governor, and other agencies. These functions will improve higher education outcomes across diverse regions and student populations.

Research from California Competes and others show that affordability, access, and time-to-degree are systemic challenges. Students in California frequently attend multiple institutions, encountering similar problems as they work toward their postsecondary goals. While the segments have made important efforts to address these issues, fundamentally, these are systemic problems that transcend any one institution or segment, and they require systemic solutions. The Commission established by AB 130 could take a statewide approach to addressing issues such as institutional capacity and supporting cross-sector initiatives such as dual enrollment and transfer programs. An independent body advising on the condition of higher education statewide is imperative to provide the student-focused leadership necessary to address challenges cohesively. California’s students deserve such a Commission to serve as their advocate.

To reassert its leadership in education, California must eliminate its distinction of being one of only two states in the nation without an executive officer or higher education coordinating body. Our higher education system requires coordinated leadership and data-driven decision-making that centers on the needs of students. For these reasons, we strongly support AB 130, and we respectfully ask for an AYE vote.