Last year the Legislature lowered the enrollment cap in California community colleges by 3.39% given the harsh funding reductions that we suffered in the 2009-10 fiscal year. However, the Legislature further stated that it was their intent that community colleges make every effort to protect classes in basic skills, transfer, and workforce training. Specifically, the Legislature’s guidance was provided in the 2009 Budget Act (Chapter 1, Statutes of 2009):

29. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges may reduce community college district base workload measures to match available funding under Schedule (1), which reflects a base reduction of $120,000,000, and local revenues designated to support community college district general apportionments. It is the intent of the Legislature that community college districts, to the greatest extent possible, shall implement any necessary workload reductions in areas other than basic skills, workforce training, and transfer. On or before March 1, 2010, the chancellor shall provide the Legislature and the Director of Finance with a report on the implementation of this provision.

In reviewing recent enrollment data, it is evident that most colleges followed this direction and made fewer cuts in basic skills, transfer, and workforce training than in other parts of the class schedule. Yet, it is well once again to remind colleges of this legislative intent.

First, unless we take the lead on this matter, then one day the Legislature may become specific in what courses we should offer. One remembers the 1980’s when the Legislature adopted a “hit list” that prohibited community colleges from receiving state funding for certain avocational courses. And we recall that last year the Legislative Analyst recommended that all physical education courses in our colleges be funded at the non-credit level. Fortunately, we were able to defeat that recommendation and prevent it from becoming law. But this still remains the view by some that we are offering too many avocational courses. We should take steps to avoid that vulnerability.

Second, it is clear that in times of scarce resources we have to prioritize. In 2009-10 it is estimated that community colleges turned away 140,000 students, most of whom were first time students. In times like this it is difficult to justify
keeping a course such as aerobics for seniors while not scheduling enough classes in basic math or English. Under these circumstances the public will be upset when students seeking transfer classes or job retraining are turned away.

The recently adopted 2010 Budget Act provides community college districts with $126 million to support an additional 26,000 full-time equivalent enrollments. These added resources represent an opportunity for community colleges to expand access to badly needed instruction in basic skills, transfer, and workforce training. As you consider how your district will use these additional funds, I strongly urge you to consider both the legislative intent and the pressing need to prioritize scarce resources, described above.

I want to be clear: This is a recommendation, not a requirement. The determination of which courses to offer is a decision made at the college level. This is the genius of our system: each college can determine the needs of its community. But I believe it is wise for us to take into account the intent of the Legislature and the general feeling of the public. It is good policy and makes sense for us to prioritize transfer, workforce training, and basic skill courses in these difficult times. We moved in that direction in 2009-10: let’s continue that trend in 2010-11.