The Press-Enterprise editorial, "College mission" (Our Views, Jan. 25), argued that the state Legislature should decide which classes community colleges teach and which students receive a college education. Frankly, the paper's logic eludes me.

Isn't this the same Legislature whose partisan politics routinely gridlock the Capitol? That failed to pass a state budget on time in 17 out of the last 25 years? Whose average voter approval rating last rose above 40 percent a decade ago, and has since been falling steadily -- hitting 15 percent in 2008, 13 percent in 2009, and 10 percent last year?

My point is not aimed at individual senators and Assembly members. But a state legislative body simply is not intended, structured or equipped to oversee every function of government or society.

An inalienable truth is that California community colleges belong to their communities, not the state. Local boards elected by local voters govern them. In this way, community colleges can respond directly to the communities' needs.

Three underlying problems that arise from this disconnect are evident in the state legislative analyst's recommendations.

First, while the state dictates that community colleges accept any student who applies, it doesn't provide the level of funding to support this open enrollment policy.

Second, the state places a priority on increasing career technical education, yet doesn't recognize that these equipment-extensive classes cost colleges more to provide and should be funded at a higher level than general education courses.

Third, the state gives community colleges zero flexibility. It controls community college enrollment fees, community college budgets, the number of community college students served, and even the amount of facility space on community college campuses used to teach those students.

The "state Capitol" is not a community, nor should it attempt to manage California's communities. Soon Sacramento will even mandate the way in which our trustees are elected, which will increase by more than $400,000 the election costs Riverside Community College District pays. It's time for the state to give community colleges what they need to do the job and get out of our way.

RCCD has been part of this community for 95 years. Our three colleges serve more than 100,000 students annually. We've built strong ties to industry, and partnerships with local businesses, public agencies, and educational institutions. A recent study indicated that RCCD enjoys an 89 percent favorable community rating. I am confident that our sister CCDs are well-regarded, too. Allow the "community" to run its "community" college.

Even though community colleges are the most direct path to the workplace for new graduates and unemployed workers, and the only path to higher education for many underprivileged students, we do not "expect to escape the fallout from the state's perpetual budget deficits." In fact, by July 1 when I will observe my second anniversary as RCCD's chancellor, we will have had to cut at least $40 million from our budget.

Community colleges are prepared to shoulder our fair share of the burden in order to get California back on sound financial footing. In return, we simply ask the state to step back so that we can do the job. What's needed isn't more regulation, but rather...
regulatory reform to allow us to control our own destinies. Recently, I met with several legislators, all of whom called for reform. I agree! The time for California to reform its control over community colleges so that we can fulfill our mission is long overdue.

Let us serve our communities and be governed by our communities.

Gregory W. Gray is chancellor of the Riverside Community College District.