

Community colleges in US facing massive cutbacks

Michigan highlights assault on education

Charles Bogle
20 May 2003

The author teaches at a community college in Michigan.

For someone who has promised to leave no child behind, President George W. Bush is certainly doing his best to keep America's children from getting ahead, especially those who come from a working class background.

Drastic cuts in higher education funding, coupled with recession-fed decreases in revenues, not to mention the costs of Bush's tax cuts and imperialist ventures, have severely undermined the nation's community college system. This is imperiling both recent high school graduates and those who, in an effort to "retrain" themselves, must attend college if they are to have any hope of escaping the Dantesque descent into a life of low wages, no health care and social misery.

Bush is getting plenty of help on the state level from Democrats. In Michigan, a state with a tradition of supporting public education, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm's recently announced slashing of community college funding threatens to close the only door to higher education available to many working class youth.

An e-mail message from the Michigan Education Association announced that the federal government's proposed fiscal budget cuts for 2004 include the elimination of 45 education programs. Compared to 2003, these cuts will decrease the education budget by \$1.56 billion.

Moreover, the fiscal crisis facing the states—which are in the most financially desperate situation since the Great Depression—has resulted in a dramatic shrinking of state funding for public services and projects.

On February 19, Governor Granholm issued an executive order to balance the 2003 budget. Spending for universities and community colleges will be reduced by 3.5 percent for the 2002-03 budget year. When the legislature's Appropriations Committee asked whether these would be the final cuts in the 2002-2003 budget year, Budget Director Mary Lannoye said they would be, if current revenue projections held. Already, however, January revenue estimates have proven to be too optimistic, leaving school

administrators wondering when the next cut will be announced.

The community college cuts for the 2003-2004 budget year have already been announced, and at 6.7 percent they are more than twice those announced for the current budget year. Taken together, the announced cuts for 2003 and 2004 amount to 10.2 percent.

The consequences for Michigan's 28 community colleges will likely vary, depending upon the financial position of each one, but every institution will be affected. Some of Michigan's community colleges are fortunate enough to have a solid property tax base, and therefore are not so dependent on state funding.

For example, at Monroe County Community College, the nearby Enrico Fermi atomic power plant and a growing population have resulted in increased property tax revenues over the past decade. For this reason, the school receives approximately 18 percent of its funding from the state. In dollar terms, the 2003-2004 budget cuts will result in a loss of approximately \$450,000—not enough to necessitate closing the college's doors or laying off full-time faculty (yet), but enough to force cutbacks in library and tutoring services and freeze hiring of full-time faculty at a time when the college has already failed to replace five full-time professors lost over the past four years.

The situation is much worse at tiny Gogebic Community College, located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which receives over 60 percent of its funding from the state. Many state college officials are openly wondering whether it will remain open. (One indication of Gogebic's precarious situation is that it was the only Michigan community college spared a reduction in its At-Risk funding).

These cutbacks are coming at a time when four-year colleges and universities continue to raise their tuition and drive working class students away from their classrooms. Nationwide, over the past few years unparalleled costs have convinced large numbers of prospective working class

students that applying to the better four-year colleges is an exercise in futility.

According to a May 13 article in the *Detroit Free Press*, a recent study by the Century Foundation (a Washington, DC public policy think tank), found that literally “thousands of academically qualified-low income students” don’t even apply to the better, more expensive colleges because they can’t afford them. How many more low-income students will decide against a good college when they learn of the proposed tuition increases projected for this fall?

In Michigan alone, newspapers are predicting 10-20 percent tuition increases this fall. Michigan Technical University, Saginaw Valley State University, and Oakland University have recently announced tuition increases of more than 10 percent, for example. The state’s other four-year universities are expected to make similar projections.

Working class youth, already struggling to make ends meet while attending college, will be required to take on even greater workloads while attending community colleges. I teach at a community college, and at the beginning of each semester, I ask my students, “How many of you work? How many hours a week?” Out of 25-30 students per class, only one or two do not raise their hand, and of those who do raise their hand, many are working 40 or more hours a week. Moreover, because wages are minimal and so few full-time jobs are available, the 40 or more hours are accumulated at two to three part-time jobs.

As you might guess, a number of my students, sometimes as many as a third of a class, either drop out because of work and academic conflicts, or are simply there because they cannot afford health insurance and are still living with parents whose insurance covers the student’s medical expenses. In addition, the financial aid they receive requires them to carry full course loads.

In the end, most of these students earn lower final grades than they might have had they been able to devote more time to their studies. National reports bear witness to this problem. In an April 16, 2002 *USA Today* article entitled “College Students Feeling Crunch of Longer Work Hours,” Mary Beth Marklein wrote that “more full-time college students are working longer hours than five years ago.” She said nearly half who work more than 25 hours per week contend their jobs are disrupting their academic progress.

For many Michigan community college students, as well as for large numbers of community college students across the country, greater sacrifices will not result in achieving greater social mobility or receiving an outstanding liberal arts education. Rather, the cutbacks in funding, coupled with the growing community college focus on job training, will reverse the gains made by the working class during the “golden” era of community college education in the 1960s

and 1970s. During those years, a large number of working class youth, many of whom were Vietnam veterans going to school under the GI Bill of Rights, attended and transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions, where they earned baccalaureate and post-graduate degrees. This allowed them to lead better and more productive lives.

However, today the emphasis is on terminal degree programs in the so-called “high tech” area (a euphemism in many cases for service sector jobs) and security or law enforcement positions. In many Michigan community colleges, general degree requirements now include computer courses, but not political science. “Tech days” become a yearly ritual, but “Liberal Arts Days” do not, and what were once foreign language labs are now “distance learning centers.”

Just south of Michigan, in Ohio, Owens Community College has installed a Homeland Security Degree Program. Given the market-driven “business model” that has been pushed on community colleges, Michigan community colleges will no doubt have to get their own homeland security departments in order to compete. But what will our working class students do when, after having received a program degree or certificate in a defunct or saturated field, they are forced to compete with a graduate of a good liberal arts college for a job that requires an education rather than training?

Announcing her budget cuts, Governor Granholm, said, “This proposal is the first step in addressing our structural deficit. Everyone will unfortunately have to share the pain of cuts.” She added, “These proposed reductions represent the best of a dark situation.”

If this is the best of a dark situation, one can only wonder how dark the present and future situation for community colleges must be.



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