

Michigan community colleges face drastic funding cuts

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With the collapse of its industrial base and an official unemployment rate of 15.2 percent, Michigan's tax revenues have fallen precipitously. According to the Michigan House Fiscal Agency, fiscal year-to-date revenues were down \$2,806.3 million, or 12.4 percent from a year ago. One result of this startling decrease is a \$920 million deficit in Michigan's General Fund and School Aid Fund.

Governor Jennifer Granholm's response to these figures has been to sign six separate budget bills that include drastic cuts in funding to higher education, particularly to the community colleges, which serve a majority of the state's working class students who most need assistance. The details of these bills underscore the commitment at the state and local levels of the Democratic Party, working at the behest of the financial elite, to privatize the post-secondary education of the working and middle class while diminishing the value of the educational experience.

As part of an overall 61 percent cut to student financial aid, the Michigan Promise Scholarship program, which was designated to assist approximately 100,000 state residents from low-income households to pay for college, was permanently eliminated. In an interview with this reporter, Dr. David Nixon, president of Monroe County Community College (MCCC), located approximately 35 miles south of Detroit, stated that "as many as 500 of our students are victims of the legislature's broken promise. Those students earned those scholarships. They have every right to be angry about it."

Also eliminated were state nursing scholarships, which will severely affect community colleges. Of the 51 nursing programs in Michigan, 23 are located in community colleges. Compounding the effect of

eliminating nursing scholarships is the fact that steadily decreasing state funding has forced all but three of Michigan's 29 community colleges to charge students by the contact hour instead of by the credit hour.

Contact hours equal the time spent in a course, while credit hours are determined by the number of hours met per week over a semester, quarter, etc. Under the credit system, if a course meets for three hours a week, the student pays for three credit hours. Under the contact system, a course involving an additional lab component—which is included in a number of courses in nursing programs—costs considerably more per semester than a standard lecture-only course.

The destruction of good paying jobs in manufacturing has left nursing one of the few fields that offer middle and working class students the opportunity to obtain decent wages and at least some benefits. With the announced cuts in scholarships and the change to contact hours, many students are being denied this opportunity as well.

Governor Granholm also announced a 0.4 percent reduction in funding for colleges and universities, while adding that even deeper cuts were spared only by the Obama administration's stimulus money targeted to higher education. However, much of this stimulus is being diverted from Michigan community colleges to prop up the state budget along with proprietary, for-profit career training institutions.

According to Dr. Nixon, approximately one month ago Governor Granholm told Michigan community colleges to send their shovel-ready projects to the state, which would then ask the federal government for the stimulus funding necessary to complete the projects. However, instead of using these monies to construct

community college facilities, which would have provided improved educational opportunities *and* construction jobs, the funds received by the state were used to fill the holes in the budget or given to the No Worker Left Behind tuition program.

This shell game was possible because of the convoluted system of distributing the federal stimulus money. Rather than being sent directly to the schools, the funds go first to the state of Michigan, which then funnels the money to the various Michigan Works/No Worker Left Behind offices. From there, the money trickles out through the Michigan counties and finally to the schools.

Monroe County, home to Monroe County Community College, is exemplary of the way in which this system shifts most of the federal stimulus funds to for-profit institutions. For the 2008-2009 academic year, Monroe County Community College only received funding for 168 new students from No Worker Left Behind. During the same period, Monroe County proprietary schools received funding for 312 new students from the same source.

For-profit institutions' receipt of nearly double the amount of funding was not due to their superior quality. When Dr. Nixon asked someone at No Worker Left Behind why the well-respected MCCC Nursing Program did not receive more funding, he was told, "They [No Worker Left Behind] have no problem giving up to double the amount of money to a propriety school which accepts lesser credentials."

Frustrated by this response, Dr. Nixon called Andy Levin, chief workforce officer, State of Michigan, and son of Democratic US Representative Senator Sander Levin, and asked whether MCCC could bid for funds without depending on the Michigan Works office. Levin told him, "There is no substitute for a strong relationship at the local level." Levin went on to explain what he meant by "strong relationship" when he stated that the decision to disburse funds is usually determined "by the location and/or preference of the company/ies." In other words, you're on your own; it all depends on your location and the attractiveness of your institution to one or more companies.

President Obama proclaimed: "Education is the way forward" when he came to Michigan in early July of this year to announce his administration's pledge of \$12 billion in stimulus funds to help the nation's community colleges weather the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. This is an insultingly minuscule sum when compared to the estimated \$23 trillion that will ultimately be handed over to Wall Street and the banks. It is furthermore regressive that much of this stimulus money is being given to for-profit career training schools while Michigan's community colleges face drastic cuts.



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