

Michigan community colleges struggling to meet demand

Charles Bogle
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Community colleges in Michigan are witnessing record enrollment, a consequence of the state's unemployment crisis as workers attempt to gain education in the hope of finding new jobs. Courses have filled in record time, and the schools, which are oriented to working class students, have in many cases been forced to stop enrollment.

Similar conditions are confronting community colleges across the US. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) December 2009 Policy Brief reported a 24.1 percent increase in full-time enrollment at US community colleges for the period between fall 2007 and 2009.

For the first time in its 46-year history, Monroe County Community College in southeastern Michigan is turning away prospective students for the winter 2010 semester. One of the college's counselors told the *World Socialist Web Site* that students with money to pay their tuition fees are being refused entry to winter semester classes due to a lack of available classroom seats. Another counselor stated that students who have been accepted into the nursing program are being forced to wait one full year before beginning courses that count toward completion of the program.

Wayne County Community College in Detroit also reached an historic first when it was forced to cap student enrollment for its spring 2010 semester. Registration was closed three weeks early after projections put enrollment at 25 percent higher than last year's figure.

Community colleges across Michigan have been

reporting similar staggering increases, and not just for the past year. According to the Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (www.macrao.org), 18 of the 29 Michigan community colleges are reporting double-digit percentage enrollment increases for the winter 2010 semester. The combined student population at two of the state's larger community colleges—Henry Ford Community College and Oakland Community College—has increased by over 37 percent during the past three years. Neither school has been forced to turn away students as yet, but Henry Ford Community College president Gail Mee told the *Detroit Free Press* that “students are limited in what they can take,” and that “we just can't meet all the need that is out there.”

These limitations and the inability to meet educational needs could not come at a worse time. Michigan's nation-leading unemployment rate and a poverty reaching depression-level proportions—the poverty rate in Wayne County, where Detroit is located, is currently 31 percent, while three lower peninsula rural counties have reached 32 percent—combined with rising tuition rates at four-year colleges and universities, leave recent high school graduates and jobless adults with little choice but community colleges. Yet community colleges are increasingly unable to fulfill their aim of offering a quality higher education to everyone.

Michigan community colleges rely on three sources for their funding: state appropriations, property taxes, and tuition. The first two sources have dropped precipitously with the onset of the current recession, while the community college system's working class students, suffering under unemployment and wage cuts,

are unable to pay drastically higher tuition rates.

As a result, community colleges are increasingly forced to look for funding through private sources and stimulus money and grants. However, relying on corporate sponsors has proven to be part of the source of the community colleges' overcrowding dilemma. When corporate sponsors fully or even partially fund the construction of new buildings, they typically demand space for their own purposes. Examples can be found at Wayne County Community College, where the lengthy recession has led to the renting of the school's east Detroit campus to a corporation at a time when the college is struggling to find classroom space for students. At Monroe County Community College, the recently constructed La-Z-Boy Center, which would not have been complete without the \$2 million backing of its furniture-making namesake, all of the rooms are reserved for corporate needs.

The Obama administration's allocations for community colleges through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has done little to meet the new needs, and has come with strings attached designed to take curriculum out of the hands of educators, drive down instructors' wages, and break workplace rules.

Of the grossly inadequate figure of \$12 billion in Obama's stimulus package allocated to community colleges, only \$2.5 billion is for construction and renovation of facilities, \$500 million is for developing new online courses, and \$9 billion is for "challenge grants" that will be awarded on a competitive basis to those community colleges that can best "innovate" new programs or revise existing curricula—an approach similar to the "Race to the Top" funding the Obama administration is attempting to force on primary and secondary public education.

Less than one-fourth of the stimulus funding will go toward meeting community colleges' most urgent need: faculty and teaching space. None of the \$2.5 billion will be made available now, when colleges are facing a critical lack of space. The stimulus in fact funnels a substantial portion of its funds to proprietary, for-profit career training institutions.

The author also recommends:

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