

# Crowding, rising tuition at Michigan community colleges

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Students at Michigan's community colleges are facing rising tuition prices, over-enrollment in classes, and declining jobs prospects upon graduation.

State enrollment in community colleges has increased by 20 percent within the last five years. Unemployed workers and working class youth are seeking job training and two-year degrees to better position themselves for work in a state that until last month had the highest unemployment rate in the country for the past decade.

Despite higher enrollment and the valuable role community colleges play, funding has declined. Property tax revenues help finance community colleges, but declining home values has seen this form of revenue plunge by 20 percent over the past two years. Federal funding to the state community colleges has also been indirectly cut due to a \$72.1 million reduction in the job-retraining "No Worker Left Behind" program.

The result of these cuts has been raised tuition and cuts in programs.

Oakland County Community College (OCCC) and Macomb County Community College (MCCC), both in suburban Detroit, each have been forced to raise tuition by 11 percent because of budget shortfalls. MCCC has also begun seeking federal grants and donations from its 120,000 alumni in the metro Detroit area. OCCC is undergoing a review to implement cost-cutting measures.

Wayne County Community College (WCCC), based in Detroit proper, has been one of the most badly affected by the economic crisis. The school has attempted to shift the decline in state funding on to its students, raising tuition by 16 percent to \$79 a credit. The school has also reached its capacity enrollment, forcing it to turn away eligible students starting last

fall.

Even enrolled students find that classes at WCCC are often full, blocking them from registering. Popular programs like nursing often put students on a lengthy waiting list.

WSWS reporters recently talked with students at WCCC about enrollment, tuition, and other problems they face.

Tameka Hubbard's story is not untypical of community college students at WCCC. A General Motors worker for 15 years, she lost her job in 2006. Now, she is on a waiting list to gain entry into WCCC's nursing program.

"A lot of people who lost their jobs at GM have tried to go back to school," Hubbard said.

Hubbard's progress at WCCC is slowed by both overcrowding and her difficulty in managing her education while caring for her one-year-old daughter.

"They need to have child care here [at WCCC], it's a big problem for a lot of students," she said. "It's hard to find somebody to watch the baby."

Hubbard's problems were echoed by Neesa Robinson.

"Who has \$300 for school when you don't have \$100 for bills," said Neesa Robinson, a 21-year-old WCCC student and single mother. She said "It's hell to juggle a kid, a job, and school."

"Financial aid cuts forces you to take out a loan," said Robinson, who is training to be a surgical technician. She has not decided yet whether or not to take out a loan for the coming year, citing fears over her prospects of finding a job to pay it back.

Her friend Danyelle Samuel, a 31-year-old WCCC student with two children, is currently experiencing that problem. Danyelle had graduated from the private, for-profit Kaplan college with a surgical technician's

degree. Yet she was unable to get a job because she lacked official certification.

For some time Samuel found low-paying jobs through the Work First program, but she has been unemployed for two years now. “It’s hard to find a job when you’re going to school and have a child,” she explained, noting that employers prefer to hire workers who have no constraints on their time.

While job prospects remain dismal, crowding and budget cutbacks are compromising the quality of education students can receive.

“There are more students now than in anytime in history,” said Edethe Wright, a sociology and business management student at WCCC. “Next semester will be worse. We will only be able to contact the college through e-mail. You will have to wait 48 hours for a response. They are raising fees and cutting back everything. They are going to even make you pay for your class schedule.... Many of the classes are not accredited. You take all these classes and another school might not accept them.”

“We are just getting our money for Pell grants and the summer session is almost out,” Wright explained. “They have even started taking processing fees out on loans.” A single required textbook cost Wright \$75, she said.

Lraschell Morton is a student whose source of income is SSI (Social Security Insurance). She is currently going to school for science and liberal arts, and plans on attending Florida A & M soon.

“If you register three weeks before classes, all classes will be full,” Morton told the WWS. “There is either not enough teachers or seats for everyone, I don’t know which.” When asked about changing schools, she said, “I’m not sure which of my credits will transfer.”

Jarrod Deberry graduated from High School in June and is attempting to enroll into the WCCC culinary program. “I want to take culinary,” he said. “I’m looking for work, but it’s hard. I’ve only gotten one call back.... I want to apply for financial aid, but they are giving me a hard time just getting my name into the system.”

Kim told the WWS that she was attending WCCC to get her certification in medical billing. “I have been unemployed for over one year,” she said. “The attendance has risen so sharply, it is hard to get into classes. They have stopped printing schedules to save

money, it’s all online now.”

“The program that I’m in [‘No Worker Left Behind’] got slashed 39 percent,” she continued. “Why slash a program that is helping people get a job? People are coming to Wayne County Community College because tuition at places like Wayne State is too high. The average person cannot afford to send their child to college for \$50,000 a year. Education should be a basic right.”

In Detroit, the difficult situation confronting college students is inseparably bound up with the broader social crisis and the ruthless slashing by city and state officials of all expenditures that benefit the population.

Students at WCCC told the WWS of these conditions. Reporters distributed fliers announcing the campaign of D’Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the State House of Representatives in Detroit’s Ninth District—and the only candidate in the city who is opposing these cuts.

Neese Robinson is bitter toward Detroit Mayor David Bing, whom she holds responsible for the cuts. “Bing has got to go!,” she said.

“They’re taking away bus transportation on Sundays,” she said. “You can’t hold a job if the buses don’t take you to it.... The way it’s going, the public schools are going to be gone.”



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