

Santa Monica College votes to postpone tuition increase following pepper spraying

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Following last Tuesday's pepper spraying of students at Santa Monica College in Southern California, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously on Friday to postpone a pilot program that would charge students extra for popular courses.

The vote was held during an "emergency public meeting" by school administrators and was designed to placate opposition among students to the two-tier plan. The police action, in which 30 people were pepper sprayed and at least two people hospitalized, provoked widespread outrage on campus.

California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott requested that the college put on hold its plans to start a nonprofit foundation that would charge students \$200 per unit for popular classes that filled up quickly, four times more than what students are currently asked to pay. The board voted 6-0 to indefinitely delay the summer program, canceling about 50 classes that were scheduled.

Over 400 students, faculty, staff and members of the general public attended the emergency meeting to hear arguments for postponing the two-tiered "contract education" plan. The meeting was well guarded by approximately forty campus security staff, campus police and City of Santa Monica police. There were no demonstrations or cameras outside the building.

An open forum with three-minute speakers went on for over an hour, as board members watched and listened from their seats onstage. Most of the speakers spoke against the prejudicial tuition hike.

While the vote is being cast as a victory for students opposed to the attack on public education and police repression on campus, in reality it is only a maneuver to buy time. Santa Monica College, like the college and university system throughout California, is facing an intense budget crisis that is being balanced on the backs

of students.

Santa Monica College President Chui Tsang strongly implied this when he spoke of the school's declining resources. "I must warn that this postponement in no way addresses the state funding crisis and the lack of seats for our students to progress in a timely way."

Tsang called the police attack on Tuesday, "a truly regrettable event" and promised that the campus police would conduct an internal investigation and a separate panel would also be set up. However, Tsang had earlier defended the police actions, saying they were necessary "to preserve public and personal safety."

Marjohnny Torres, 22, told the *New York Times*, "This should have happened two months ago. If it wouldn't have been for Tuesday night and the students saying something about it, this would not have happened."

The situation facing California's community colleges is dire. Santa Monica College has already eliminated 1,100 out of 7,430 classes since 2008. California community colleges have been forced to cut \$800 million over the last three years, and as a result have turned away 200,000 prospective students and offered fewer courses.

The current price of tuition at SMC, \$46 per credit hour, is an increase from just a few years ago of \$20 per credit. As is the case with most US colleges, SMC has responded to the state budget cuts by limiting sections, so that when classes fill up they do not hire new instructors or open new classes. As a result, many students take more than two years to get an associates degree, and for some it can take several years.

Under Governor Jerry Brown's budget plan, the college could lose another \$5 million if voters do not approve his November ballot initiative to raise taxes.



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