

Survey of California's community colleges reveals harmful impact of budget cuts

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A survey released last week by the California Community Colleges system, the nation's largest, estimated that at least 472,000 of the 2.4 million students who attend a community college had to be put on a wait list for classes this fall. The survey documented the desperate state of two-year colleges in California which have seen more than \$809 million in budget cuts in the last three years alone.

The colleges can expect more cuts in the future regardless whether voters approve or reject Governor Jerry Brown's tax proposal in November. (See "The reactionary essence of California's proposition 30")

The informal survey was undertaken by the chancellor's office, with 78 of the 116 community colleges in California responding. According to the schools surveyed, total enrollment has dropped 17 percent below the peak year of 2008-2009, when nearly 3 million Californians attended. Since then, the state government has slashed education spending by millions of dollars, forcing some campuses to cut their course offerings by 24 percent. In the meantime, the state has also made it more expensive to attend a two-year college, raising the cost from \$26 per unit in 2010-2011 to \$46 per unit today.

In a related statement, Los Rios Community College District Chancellor Brice Harris said, "At the high-water mark of January 2009, Los Rios had 93,000 students. This week we opened the doors with 82,000 students but that's only half of the story because state projections showed us at about 100,000 students. So, really the number of students being denied access to these colleges in the Sacramento region is somewhere in the neighborhood of 15,000 to 18,000."

Among the schools that responded to the survey, 70.5 percent said their enrollment dropped from the previous

academic year, while 20 saw an increase. At least 79.5 percent of surveyed schools said their students had to get on waiting lists for classes next semester. In addition, 78.7 percent of all classes at the responding schools were expected to be full this fall.

About 68 percent of surveyed colleges had to reduce or eliminate student services, which are essential in helping lower-income and working class students attend and prepare for school. In fact, the survey found that budget cuts also took a heavy toll on teachers and faculty; at least 87.2 percent of the responding schools reported reducing their staffs between the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years, while adjunct faculty were cut at 75.8 percent of said schools. Jack Scott, the chancellor of the California Community Colleges system told reporters that a "majority" of the staff reductions occurred through retirements and resignations.

Making the current decline in enrollment all the more striking is the fact that more students than ever want to attend college but budget cuts at the state and federal levels have made it nearly impossible for cash-strapped schools to admit everyone and still offer enough classes, teachers and supporting faculty.

To make matters worse, the community colleges stand to face an additional \$338 million "trigger cut" if voters reject Gov. Brown's tax proposal in the November general election. These automatic cuts are part of an estimated total of \$1 billion in cuts to education that are planned in January 2013 if voters do not approve the tax increases. However, even if the proposal does get approved, it will only postpone further cuts to the next budget.

Deborah G. Blue, chancellor of Central California's

State Center Community College District, described to the *San Francisco Chronicle* the situation facing youth in the area near Fresno where unemployment is as high as 33 percent, saying that community college “isn’t just one option, it’s the only option for higher education.” She added, “Our biggest fear is that they’ll be discouraged because of reductions and not come to college at all.”

Also, the California Student Aid Commission announced recently that Cal Grant awards have been reduced by 5 percent as part of Gov. Brown’s 2012-2013 budget which also cut from K-12 education in addition to child care and development. Cal Grants help students pay for tuition and other fees. To be eligible, students need a minimum 3.0 GPA, to be actively working toward their undergraduate degrees or certificates, and demonstrate financial need.

At San Francisco State University, nearly 2,000 Cal Grant students will be affected by the reduction. Barbara Hubler, SFSU director of the student financial aid office told the *Golden Gate Xpress* that the reduction to Cal Grants would have to “be covered somehow” in the form of “more loans, more work hours or doing with less.”

In the fall of 2010, tuition at SFSU was raised five percent to \$2,115, only to be raised 12 percent the following year to \$2,736 per semester. Students currently attending the school now have to pay \$2,985 per semester.

The crisis of public education is a direct consequence of the disastrous budget cuts implemented by the Brown administration at the state level as well as the Obama federal government nationally. In both cases, the Democratic Party has relied on the faithful services of trade unions such as the CTA, the CFT and the SEIU, consistently supportive of Brown’s and Obama’s executive seats as well as their respective policies of public fund slashing.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed students to assess how the cuts are affecting them.

Eric, a student at Santa Monica Community College, told the WSWS: “I have thousands of dollars in student loans. When I started school, I assumed I would be able to pay them off. Now, I am not so sure. I am majoring in education, and hoping to find a job teaching English as a second language in China or Japan. I would like to find work here in the United States, but am not certain it will be possible.”

Asked whether the economic crisis had affected his

family, he replied: “My parents both have jobs but many people we know are struggling to find work. We are all worried about money and my future employment. Things seem to be moving in the wrong direction though, if we cannot pay for these basic services, yet the rich can take more and more. Something big will have to change. Many of the students here would favor taxing the ‘1 percent’ to get back some of that money for education.”

Howard Smith, a first-year student and campus worker at San Diego State University, noted the differences between the community college class and his school at the four-year university. “At the community college I was eligible for the Board of Governor’s fee waiver (enrollment fee waiver for students deemed economically incapable of affording class). Now I don’t get any financial aid and have to rely on student loans—and the loans aren’t enough.” On the question of the cuts, Smith said “I don’t understand why they are cutting spending for schooling when we are the future of this country.”

Katy, a fifth-year student at San Diego State University, entered the college in 2008. She witnessed the ballooning of registration fees, commenting, “when I entered school, tuition was around \$1500. Now it’s up to nearly \$3000. That’s double. Because ISCOR (International Security and Conflict Resolution) is an impacted major, I’ve seen the amount of classes being offered cut in half from my enrollment.”

As the new school year begins, students and youth face an increasingly dire situation. Those from working class and poor backgrounds are being systematically denied the right to a free, high quality education. Students who graduate are plagued with massive student loan debt for the rest of their lives with no guarantee of finding a decent job deserving of their skills and education. As Katy put it, “So many people are ruled out of getting an education and/or a job. We should be able to have a channel to utilize our skills.”



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