

Budget cuts severely impact US community college students

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Community colleges are experiencing declining enrollment due to historic cuts to state funding, while demand for a community college education is at a record high. Those most likely to attend community colleges—low-income youth, first generation students, as well as workers who have been thrown out of a job and are seeking retraining—are finding it increasingly difficult to gain access to a low-cost education.

Community colleges accommodated 450,000 new full-time students in 2010, a 12 percent increase from 2009, accounting for more than 40 percent of new full-time students in 2010. Despite the increasing demand for education at community colleges, state funding continues to trend downward. Nationally state funding dropped approximately \$1,000 per community college student in 2010, a 15 percent decline from the year before. Out of all higher education institutions in the US, only community colleges were spending less per student in 2010 than they had been in 2000.

The impact of budget cuts has been particularly egregious in the state of California, where massive budget cuts have resulted in a significant decline in both course offerings and enrollment. Course offerings are at a 15-year low and enrollment at a 20-year low. Enrollment has been declining from a peak of 1.79 million students in 2008.

A report released last month by the Public Policy Institute of California makes clear the impact of budget cuts on California's community colleges. The community college system in California has been subject to \$1.5 billion in budget cuts since 2007. The passage of Proposition 30 in November 2012—which provided \$210 million in new funding for the 2012 school year, extracting billions in taxes falling heavily on the working class—is just a momentary reprieve from the push for more budget cuts.

As a means of making up for budget losses, student fees have been rising year after year. In 2012 student fees were raised to \$46 per unit, a 28 percent increase over 2011. Over the last 10 years student fees have more than tripled. It is important to note that prior to 1984 students could attend California community colleges without paying any fees for classes.

These cuts have been translated into a drop in the number of course offerings. In the California system course offerings dropped 21 percent between 2007 and 2011. The largest cuts were to fine arts and education programs, followed closely by business and management programs. Fewer course offerings have contributed to significant increases in class sizes and the growth of course waiting lists. The median class size in 2010 was 31 students, up from approximately 26 students in the year 2000. A survey by the California Community College Chancellors Office found that 80 percent of community colleges had a waiting list for courses offered for Fall 2012, with almost 500,000 waiting to get into a course.

As California's community colleges cut back on course offerings and students are required to wait to take the classes necessary to complete their degree, enrollment has been dropping significantly. Between 2008 and 2011 total enrollment at California's community colleges declined by almost half a million students. The participation rate—the percentage of those 15 and older enrolled in California community colleges—dropped to a 20-year low in 2010.

In other states such as Virginia, community college enrollment has been growing at unprecedented rates while state funding has been shrinking. Enrollment grew more than 13 percent between 2007 and 2009, while state funding was cut by 27 percent between 2008 and 2012. This has resulted in a 41 percent

reduction in state funding per student over those five years.

In Illinois, enrollment at community colleges has been dropping after years of significant growth. Since 2010 enrollment in Illinois public community colleges has dropped more than 6 percent. The 2013 Illinois state budget will enforce a 1.6 percent reduction in funding to community colleges.

Many first generation and low-income students who enroll in community college do so as a cheaper alternative to public universities or as preparation for transferring to a four-year college. Public colleges and universities are also experiencing historic cuts in funding, leading to an increase in tuition and a corresponding increase in student loan debt, making it increasingly difficult for community college students to get a four-year degree. Since 2009 tuition and fees, including financial aid, have surpassed state and local government support as the largest source of funding for four-year institutions.



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