



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Nov. 15-19, 2010

Affordable College Slipping Away From Californians

By UCLA IDEA

Higher education holds an exalted position among California residents. According to a report released this week by the Public Policy Institute of California, nearly all Californians think a college degree is important to the quality of life and economic vitality of the state. Another 63 percent said college was necessary to being successful.

A majority of those polled believe the University of California, California State University and community colleges are doing a good job educating students. But, at the same time, they are worried that budget issues and decreased funding will make it difficult to retain this high-caliber education for all eligible students. A majority of parents—and 72 percent of Latino parents—are concerned about paying for college. And 73 percent think high prices are keeping qualified students from attending college all together.

The public is split on taxes. Roughly half (49 percent) would agree to increase taxes to support higher education, but most would rather pay more than increase student fees. The PPIC survey also found support for UC to recruit more out-of-state students as money-makers for the system, as long as this didn't mean fewer spaces available for residents. Out-of-state students pay about \$23,000 more than resident students. Currently, non-residents are capped at 6.5 percent of the student population, and this will raise to 10 percent. Supporters of the increase claim the amount of slots open to residents wouldn't diminish.

Even if enrollment numbers are not affected, access will be even more restrictive now that both the UC and Cal State systems approved tuition increases in recent days. The Cal State Board of Trustees increased tuition by 15 percent—with a 5-percent increase to take effect this year and 10 percent next year. Then, the UC Regents increased tuition by 8 percent, or \$822, next year. These increases follow a 32-percent hike for both systems last year.

"Students every year are paying more and more for an education that they're getting less and less from," said Jared McCreary, 23, a fourth-year UC Riverside student. "You still see a lot of students struggling, having to take out loans, working multiple jobs."

Both university systems said the hikes were necessary to continue the high-caliber education they offer. At the Cal States, the increase will mean more classes and more sections. But Douglas Domingo-Foraste, a Cal State Long Beach professor, said the increases would likely keep more students from completing a degree in four years.

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"So many students and their families work two or three jobs to be able to afford college, and I think the people on the Board of Trustees have no conception of what it's like to be on the margin," Domingo-Foraste said. "When a student can't take a class because they're having to work more, you're providing less access."

The burden will be hardest for students with few financial aid options. Immigrant students without legal paperwork, can't receive state or federal grants or student loans. Many get by with multiple jobs and some have to take breaks from school to save up enough money.

There was some good news for many students this week when the California Supreme Court ruled that undocumented students could continue to attend public colleges and universities at resident-tuition levels. In 2001, the state had passed AB540, which allows students who attended three years of state high school and graduated to be eligible for the lower rate. However, this law was challenged, and the result was uncertain until this week. The law also applies to some students, such as those in California boarding schools, whose families live in other states. By keeping the status quo California avoids adding another hurdle to those that already exist.

The existing challenges facing students interested in attending California colleges are substantial. The state's colleges are increasingly more expensive than many California students can afford. The question facing Californians is whether to support the universities with more tax dollars or place the increased burden solely on students and their families by increasing tuition.