



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of April 2-9, 2012

Let Them Eat Goals

by UCLA IDEA

The nation's public colleges and universities are starving for the resources they need to educate. But instead of getting new capacity, they are given ambitious and lofty goals. This contradiction was nowhere more evident this week than in Santa Monica.

A large crowd of protesting students showed up for Tuesday night's Santa Monica College board meeting, where trustees were to discuss a controversial increase in the cost of some classes and a still-obscure method for granting tuition relief to an unspecified number of students who would be affected. About a dozen students were allowed in the boardroom, and the rest were directed to an overflow room where proceedings were to be shown on video screen. Trustees refused appeals to move the meeting to a larger venue where all students could be seen and heard. When almost 100 protestors tried to enter the main boardroom, they were met with pepper spray.

These events in Santa Monica expose a contradiction playing out at public higher education campuses nationwide: great pressure to grow enrollment and college success and too few resources to do it. President Obama has called for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. The Lumina Foundation established an initiative to ensure that 60 percent of American adults secure high-quality college degrees or certificates by 2025. Yet, these goals for substantially increasing college degree attainment come in a period of declining support for public higher education, particularly in California.

The Santa Monica Community College proposal tries to address cuts of more than 1,000 classes since 2008. Students have an increasingly hard time enrolling in and affording the courses they need for a degree or for transfer to a four-year college or university. "Our classes are inundated with students begging to be enrolled after they're full," college President Chui L. Tsang said last month. This situation delays the progress of many students, he added, and leaves other looking to enroll in required courses "at more expensive private or for-profit college[s]."

In response, the college has proposed a two-tiered tuition plan to support more course offerings. In addition to regular courses being raised to \$46 per unit this summer, a handful of high-demand courses, like history, math and English, would be offered through a nonprofit foundation associated with the college for \$180 per unit. Santa Monica College has received agreement from some private donors to support scholarships that will enable some low-income students to access higher-priced classes offered through the nonprofit foundation.

College officials maintain that, since these additional courses will not be offered directly by the college, the tuition rates need not be limited to standards established for community colleges by the state. Yet, the courses would be offered on the Santa Monica College campus by Santa Monica College

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faculty. In effect, Santa Monica College officials aim to bring in more revenue (and create more space) by moving state-supported higher education outside the existing public higher education system.

Since Tuesday's meeting, state Community College Chancellor Jack Scott asked the college to hold off implementation until the legality of the College's plan can be assessed. This morning, college President Tsang acquiesced to Scott's request, recommending that his board postpone implementation of the plan until the public could fully weigh in on the matter.

Beyond the very real and important legal issues, are fundamental questions about educational equity and the mission of California Community Colleges. Does the Santa Monica College plan afford low-income students with less access to required courses than more affluent peers? Does it leave them with the feeling that they are second-class students within a public institution? Does relying on the largess of nonprofit funding for scholarships, leave the college (and its students) vulnerable to the inevitable ups and downs of such support? Does the two-tier plan undermine the unique and longstanding mission of the community colleges to provide low cost tuition on equal terms to all students?

Students and higher education officials in Santa Monica and across the state will be grappling with these questions in the weeks ahead. Of course, another alternative is to not put the students and the college in this squeeze in the first place.

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