



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Aug. 27-31, 2012

The Short Run, the Long Run, and the Run Around

by UCLA IDEA

"I tried to find classes online, but most of them were full. So I decided to come the first day to find any free space."

"It's hard to get into anything. But I'm going to keep trying because I don't want to wait another year."

"...there are so many students trying to get classes; it's chaotic."

These are some student voices from the first day of class at Los Angeles-area community colleges. Like many new and returning college students across the state, they are starting the school year off paying more for courses and fighting harder amongst themselves for a coveted spot in a class needed to graduate, to earn a certificate or to transfer to a four-year college or university.

Budget cuts have claimed \$809 million from the California Community Colleges, and the campuses have responded by reducing courses, staff and support services, like counselors. A survey of 78 of the 112 community colleges conducted by the chancellor's office this month tracked an enrollment decline of almost half a million students since 2008. "We've lost more students than are enrolled at all California State University campuses combined," said Chancellor Jack Scott.

Those students still attending community colleges will face a number of challenges in completing coursework. More than 70 percent of responding community colleges reported cutting courses. More than 470,000 students across California are now on course wait lists. These students will find it difficult to make-up missed coursework during the academic year. Eighty-two percent of community colleges indicated they won't offer winter or intercession classes during the 2012-13 academic year. Further, students looking for advice on how to navigate these difficult circumstances may not find the needed help: 66 percent of community colleges reported staff cutbacks have led to increased waiting time for student appointments.

The system is threatened with another \$338 million in mid-year cuts should voters reject Gov. Brown's Proposition 30 tax initiative. This uncertainty is making it difficult for community colleges to execute their mission—provide job training and an important entry point for students planning to complete four-year degrees at Cal State or University of California campuses. And, at the same time, community colleges are increasingly asked to stretch their resources to provide remedial classes to students whose high schools did not adequately prepare them.

The challenges and frustrations faced by California's community college students have far-reaching and long-term consequences. An August 2012 study from Georgetown University notes that the workers who lack college degrees have fared poorly during the recession. Of the jobs lost during the

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Great Recession, half have been recovered. Virtually all of these jobs require some form of higher education. There is little chance that the jobs once available to those without at least some college will return.

By depriving community colleges the resources they need, we are insuring a high level of structural unemployment in California and permanent problems with productivity and economic growth. This outcome flies in the face of the "primary mission" that California's legislature articulated for the Community College system in 1999: "to advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness." The irony is not lost on Henry Brady, dean of UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy and co-author of *California's Economic Payoff*. "Legislators can be myopic; because not spending money looks like a good idea in the short run, but in the long run, it's a terrible idea."

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