

Closing the Door, Increasing the Gap: Who's not going to (community) college?

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Executive Summary

Across our nation, community colleges are closing their doors, deferring the dreams of more than 400,000 prospective students. It is a retreat from America's commitment to expand college access and success happening, ironically, at the very moment that our nation's leaders say we need more, not fewer, people with post-secondary education. It is a retreat that threatens our nation's future.

This report, the first by The Center for the Future of Higher Education, analyzes recent problematic enrollment and policy trends at the nation's community colleges. It uncovers trends toward expanding caps on community college enrollment and narrowing the educational programs available for students, denying access to higher education for large numbers of lower-income students and students of color.

Enrollment in community colleges across the country is plateauing and declining despite rising student demand. Insufficient funding and institutional capacity are largely to blame. Already "doing more with less" by employing part-time faculty and investing heavily in online technology and distance learning, community colleges still find student demand outstripping institutional capacity. Our "open door colleges" are closing their doors due to insufficient public investment.

In a complicated "cascade effect," higher tuition and enrollment limitations at four-year institutions have pushed middle-class and upper middle-class students toward community colleges. This, in turn, increases competition for seats in community college classrooms at a time when funding for community colleges is being slashed and fees are increasing. As community colleges draw more affluent students, opportunity is being rationed and lower-income students (many of whom are students of color) are being denied access to higher education.

For those who do gain entry, community colleges are "rebooting" their curriculums to put more emphasis on narrow job training and "workforce development" and less on a broad liberal arts and sciences education necessary for continuing on for a Bachelor's degree. By focusing on providing short-term certificates in response to the immediate needs of the corporate private sector rather than on educating students for transfer to a four-year school, community colleges are seriously narrowing their educational purpose.

Traditionally, our community colleges have been critical portals of entry to higher education for underserved students. They enroll high proportions of Latino/a, African-American, and Native-American students and high proportions of students from lower-income and working class families. It is these

students whose futures are being compromised by recent enrollment and curricular trends that are refocusing community colleges on a narrower range of students and educational goals.

The report's conclusion offers practical suggestions for publicizing the number of students not served, for tracking rationing by class and race/ethnicity, and for doing a rebooting scan of colleges. The aim is to provide faculty, professionals, and students the tools to support a new course for our community colleges that is based on three of the founding principles of The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education (CFHE).

- **Quality higher education in the 21st century will require substantially more public investment over current levels.** The nation cannot afford to close the doors of community colleges at a time of rising student demand. The false economy of not serving students by restricting access and narrowing curriculum will not expand higher education attainment. We must reinvest in community colleges as our most used and most democratic institutions of higher education.
- **Higher education in the 21st century must be inclusive; it should be available and affordable for all who can benefit from and want a college education.** The nation must ensure that students are not being squeezed out of community colleges disproportionately in terms of race, ethnicity, or social class. We call on faculty groups and their student, community, and union allies to ensure that institutions of higher education document who is being denied real educational opportunity by current policies and develop practices that prevent the rationing of higher education by race, ethnicity, or social class.
- **The curriculum for quality 21st century higher education must be broad and diverse.** A democratic nation requires a broadly educated citizenry developed by a system of quality higher education for all who desire it and can benefit from it. It does not serve our country well to push already underserved students into terminal programs for workforce development and job training.

By capping community college enrollments and narrowing community college curriculums, we are betraying a generation and renege on our country's promise. Instead, national, state, and local educational policy should recognize, support, and invest in community colleges as institutions that ensure open access to and success in quality higher education without regard to race, ethnicity, or social class.

CFHE calls on faculty, students, unions, and community groups as well as policymakers and college administrators to work together to ensure that we respond to rising student demands by constructing a system of higher education that is consistent with the basic principles of our country as expressed in the founding statement of the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education.

Learn more about CFHE and see the campaign's Principles of Quality Higher Education at <http://futureofhighered.org>

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