

MINNESOTA POST

Avoid generational betrayal: Reinvest in community colleges

By [Jeff Kolnick](#) | 04/05/12

A [recent report](#) [PDF] by the Center for the Future of Higher Education indicates that in 2012 some 400,000 American college-bound students will be turned away from community colleges because of restricted access resulting from a lack of institutional capacity (the center is a "virtual think tank" attached to [The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education](#)). This is a crisis we cannot afford as a nation.



It is also a very personal issue with me. I began my career in the community-college system, and most of my intellectual growth can be attributed to a handful of teachers who took the time to turn an undisciplined teenager into a promising college student. I believe in the community-college system and to see the doors close is another indication of the generational betrayal we are witnessing in America and in Minnesota.

Community colleges represent a lifeline for most college-bound Americans; it is the port of entry for most people to continue with their education after high school.

Indeed, in Minnesota 138,006 people were enrolled in our community colleges in 2010, [substantially more than in any other type of institution](#).

Lack of state support

According to the report, "de facto" enrollment caps will result from limited class offerings in 16 states including California, Connecticut, Illinois, Nevada, North Carolina, Utah and Wisconsin. In each case, community colleges have already turned to higher class sizes and tuition, more on-line classes, and substantial use of adjunct faculty to trim costs. The issue is not efficiency in the classroom but lack of state support to hire enough teachers to meet the demand.

When students are being turned away from community colleges, we have to ask who is not going to college. The study finds that increasing costs of four-year schools have led middle- and upper-class students to begin their careers at two- year colleges and this has forced poorer students, too often students of color, to be turned away – thus ending the open-door policy that has characterized community colleges since their founding.

While Minnesota has been spared from enrollment caps, we are moving in the same direction. We are both increasing tuition and fees while equating college exclusively with work-force development and job training rather than as a way to contribute to the community as a citizen. When I went to college, we were trained to succeed on the job *and* as citizens.

Fortunately, the Center for the Future of Higher Education offer some remedies for this crisis.

Scrutinize trends to ensure we're not rationing

The report calls for rejecting the false economy of restricting access and narrowing curriculum and instead recommends reinvesting in community colleges as our most used and most democratic institutions of higher education. It also recommends careful scrutiny of community-college enrollment trends to ensure that we are not rationing higher education by race, ethnicity and income.

Minnesota is rapidly becoming a more diverse and unequal state. We cannot afford to limit access to quality education. In 2003, former NAACP Board Chair Julian Bond [summed up the need](#) to open the doors of opportunity to everyone:

We live in a small world. If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of 100 people, with existing ratios remaining the same, the world would look like this:

- There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere, both north and south, and 8 Africans.
- 52 of the 100 would be female. 70 would be nonwhite. 70 would not be Christians.
- Six of the 100 people would own 59 percent of all the wealth in the world and all six of these would be from the United States.
- 80 of the 100 would live in substandard housing. 70 would be unable to read and write. 50 would suffer from malnutrition.
- Only one would own a computer. Only one would have a college education.

Mutual dependence, responsibilities

Looking at the world in this way, we are reminded of our mutual dependence and mutual responsibilities. When I started working four decades ago, there were five workers paying into the national retirement system for every retiree. I can't possibly know who my five were, but their names could easily have been Carl, Ralph, Bob, Steve and Bill.

When I retire, there will only be three workers paying into the retirement system. Their names could easily be Tamika, Maria and Jose.

We need to provide them with the best schools, the best health care, the best jobs, and the strongest protections against discrimination we possibly can.

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