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Declining enrollments and deferred dreams at community colleges

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Despite growing demand for college admission and continuing economic and social need for well-educated citizens, our community colleges are closing their doors on over 400,000 prospective students.

This is the finding of an important new report entitled "Closing the Door, Increasing the Gap" issued by The Center for the Future of Higher Education (a "virtual think tank" attached to The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education).

Sad to say, California in general and San Bernardino County in particular are participating in this national trend.

The report points out that across the nation due to insufficient funding community colleges are experiencing declining enrollments while student demand is increasing. This is true even though community colleges, more than any other sector of the higher education system, have adopted so-called "productivity" measures such as using lots of part-time faculty and moving instruction online via distance learning technology.

The document (released on April 2nd and available at <http://futureofhighed.org>) also finds that the campus doors are closing disproportionately on lower income students and students of color.

Through a kind of economic cascade effect, decreased funding for public four-year universities leads to higher tuition and fees which, in turn, push middle class and upper class students out of universities and into community colleges. At the same time, declining funding for community colleges leads to increased fees and fewer classes at what once were our "open door" institutions.

Since community colleges have historically been the portals of entry into higher education for lower income

students (who are often students of color), increased competition for fewer spots at those institutions shuts the campus doors on hundreds of thousands of able but traditionally underserved students.

In addition, community colleges are narrowing down the kind of educational experience they offer those who are able to enroll by placing more and more emphasis on narrow workforce development and job training instead of focusing on the kind of broad general education that might lead to an AA, BS, or BA degree. By adopting policies that force community colleges to cap enrollment and narrow the curriculum, we are betraying a generation and renege on our country's promise

This month Jack Scott, the Chancellor of California Community Colleges, announced that the state's community colleges shed more than 300,000 students since 2009 and have reduced course offerings by about 20% even though student demand is higher than ever.

Scott noted that the closing-out of students at the state's community colleges will be exacerbated by the California State University's recent decision to freeze admissions for spring of 2013, a decision which will send 15,000 would-be transfer students back to the community colleges.

Here in San Bernardino County, enrollment at San Bernardino Valley College is down by 14% in the face of rising demand for courses. Valley President Debra Daniels was quoted in the Hechinger Report saying "It breaks my heart. People want in and they can't get it."

The Center's report recommends a change of course for community colleges.

The report calls for rejecting the false economy of restricting access and narrowing curriculum and 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.

The final recommendation is for community colleges to return to their historical goal of providing a broad and inclusive education to all who desire it and can benefit from it.

In a telling comparison, the report notes that a look back at recent national history uncovers the power and potential of a different path for higher education policy. In the aftermath of World War II, the nation experienced great increases in the demand for higher education by prospective students without a lot of money but with a wealth of potential.

At the time, policy makers and political leaders recognized that providing access to college for this rising tide of students would benefit the nation by allowing it to fulfill its promises to its citizens and to realize the promise of democracy. As a result, they enacted the GI Bill and other policies that increased access to higher education for all.

The decision to increase access to higher education continued to define the nation's educational policy for decades and helped to ground California's much-praised Master Plan for Higher Education. The nation and the state face a similar challenge today: do we increase access to college and the middle class or do we turn back hundreds of thousands of prospective students, deferring the dreams of a generation?

The answer to this question will go a long way toward determining whether we succeed or fail in the 21st century.