

Closing the door on community colleges

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Even as the White House directs billions of dollars to community college job-training programs, [a new report from the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education \(CFHE\)](#) shows that hundreds of thousands of students have been denied access to public two-year colleges because of funding and capacity issues.

Last year, for the first time since the onset of the Great Recession, enrollment in public two-year colleges actually declined — 5.1 percent overall, according to National Student Clearinghouse figures. In the West, where the California system has been particularly hard hit by state funding cuts, enrollment declined 9.1 percent overall.



Gary Rhoades

“Across our nation, community colleges are closing their doors, deferring the dreams of more than 400,000 students,” wrote Arizona professor Gary Rhoades, the author of the report entitled, [“Closing the Door, Increasing the Gap: Who’s not going to \(community\) college?”](#)

“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,” writes Rhoades. “It is a retreat that threatens our nation’s future.”

In California alone, 133,000 first-time students were unable to register for even one class in the 2009-10 school year, according to a California Community Colleges report. That number is expected to reach at least a quarter-million. At Miami Dade College in South Florida, administrators announced in 2009 that they would not be able to accommodate the needs of 30,000 students. One national survey of community college directors last year found “de facto” enrollment caps in sixteen states.

The problem is funding — public funds for higher education fell 7 percent overall last year, leaving colleges to do more with less. Increasingly, administrators are turning to low-paid, part-time faculty, but they also are laying off staff, closing programs, and capping enrollment. At one Oregon community college this year, [administrators sent pink slips to one out of three full-time faculty](#), and shuttered popular programs like law enforcement.

Colleges also are shifting their financial woes onto students. In 2012, tuition costs are expected to jump 5.8 percent, on top of 5.6 percent last year. For poor students, these “low-cost” alternatives to four-year or private colleges aren’t so accessible anymore. Interestingly, [a recent study by Sallie Mae](#) found that

the percentage of middle-income students in community colleges increased by 24 to 29 percent between 2009 and 2011, while percentage of upper-income students rose from 12 to 22 percent.

In the meantime, the White House has put forward an [\\$8 billion Community College to Career Fund](#) in the President's proposed 2013 budget, and House Democrats would fund a great deal of it in their proposed [reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act](#).

But, as this new study from the CFHE notes, most of the new federal funding goes specifically to job-training programs in specific fields, like transportation or health services. While vitally important to out-of-work Americans and employers, these programs still won't fix the broader problems.

With that in mind, in its report, the Campaign, which is a grassroots network of faculty across the country, calls on educators, students, unions, and community groups to demand a level of public funding that would support a high-quality, broad curriculum, available to all Americans. "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."

<http://www.educationvotes.nea.org/2012/04/10/closing-the-door-on-community-colleges/>