

Chronicle of Higher Education

Thursday, May 21, 2009

California Community Colleges May Reduce Enrollment by 250,000 Students

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The reduction would occur if the Legislature adopts large cuts in state support proposed by the governor, system leaders said on Wednesday, following the defeat of five ballot measures to shrink the state's budget deficit.

California's community colleges will reduce their enrollment by 250,000 students in the coming academic year if large cuts in state support proposed by the governor are adopted, the system's leaders announced on Wednesday.

The announcement comes in response to a budget proposal from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, that would help close the state's estimated \$21-billion budget deficit by cutting support for community colleges by 11 percent, or \$825-million, over the next 13 months. On Tuesday, five state ballot measures designed to help reduce that gap were overwhelmingly defeated, and lawmakers will now have to decide whether to adopt the governor's plan.

If the budget cuts are enacted, the 110-campus system will be forced to reduce its enrollment by a minimum of 250,000 students because it will have to eliminate courses and fire thousands of faculty and staff members, community-college officials said. The California community-college system is the nation's largest, enrolling about 2.7 million full- and part-time students each year.

The system has never considered an enrollment cut of such magnitude in the modern era, officials said. A drop of 250,000 students would amount to cutting more than the entire enrollment of the University of California system.

Martha J. Kanter, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District in California and President Obama's nominee for U.S. under secretary of education, said the budget cuts to the community colleges will be devastating.

"As the president said, we need to have the best education and the most competitive work force in the world," she said. "We won't."

Governor Schwarzenegger's proposed budget cuts are a clear demonstration that education is not among the state's highest priorities, Ms. Kanter said. "Californians are going to have to pay more for their highest priorities. If you don't pay more, this is what you get."

Reversing a Surge in Enrollment

The announcement represents a turning point for the community-college system, which had previously attempted to absorb budget cuts without shrinking the student population. The cuts would reverse a sharp surge in enrollment that many of the system's colleges have seen since the beginning of the economic downturn, which has prompted more people to seek job retraining.

Community-college leaders in Sacramento and Merced said on Wednesday that their enrollment levels for summer and fall courses were up by 30 percent to 50 percent over last year, but that the next round of state budget cuts would force many of the newest students out.

Constance M. Carroll, chancellor of the San Diego Community College District, said her district has already had to cut 600 courses, despite a 10-percent surge in enrollment.

"This has been a horrendous period of time for us and a massive failure of public policy for community colleges," Ms. Carroll said. The recession, she added, has brought on "an unprecedented collision between high demand and low support."

In most cases, Californians will not be prevented from enrolling at a community college, but they may find there are no courses left for them to take. Disabled and low-income students will be the most likely to be shut out of the system, said Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California, a nonprofit organization that helps two-year colleges organize and lobby for money.

"It's survival of the fittest," Mr. Lay said. The neediest students, he said, are less likely to sign up early and attend each of the first few class meetings, which would help ensure them a spot.

All three of California's public systems of higher education are expecting to receive major budget cuts in the next few months, and leaders at California State University and the University of California have announced enrollment cuts on a smaller scale. But the university systems have more-diverse sources of financing and can rely, at least temporarily, on federal stimulus funds to help close the gap, while community colleges depend almost entirely on state support.

Cuts in Support for Students

Under Governor Schwarzenegger's proposal, community colleges would see \$825-million in budget cuts by the end of the 2009-10 fiscal year. Campus programs that provide support for disabled and low-income students would receive particularly severe cuts under the proposal, as would physical-education and recreational courses.

About \$125-million of the proposed cuts would take effect in the current fiscal year, which ends on June 30, if approved by lawmakers. College officials said those immediate cuts would exacerbate problems many of the state's community colleges are already having in keeping enough of a cash reserve to meet their day-to-day financial needs.

A slate of ballot measures would have prevented the need for the most severe of the proposed budget cuts, but voters overwhelmingly rejected five out of the six propositions on Tuesday. Mr. Lay said that Californians were right to distrust the state's notoriously dysfunctional budget process but that, for community colleges, the consequences of the voters' decision would quickly become clear.

"I appreciate the public's frustration: They believe it's the boy who cried wolf, and that's what happened yesterday," he said. "They don't trust anybody that devastating cuts are coming. Well, devastating cuts are coming now."