

April 8, 2010

Pressures of New Students and Old Weigh on Community Colleges

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/09/education/09sfcollege.html?pagewanted=1>

By KATHARINE MIESZKOWSKI



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Budget problems have caused cutbacks in academic counseling at City College of San Francisco. Monica McCarthy, a counselor, advised a freshman on Tuesday.

Monica McCarthy, an academic counselor at [City College of San Francisco](#) for eight years, has worked with thousands of [community college](#) students hoping to transfer to state universities.

But lately she has encountered more and more state university students clamoring to enroll in community college classes.

“It’s been crazy,” Ms. McCarthy said. “I have a lot of students from San Francisco State saying, ‘I can’t get into my lower-division classes at State. I need to come in here.’”

Not that there are seats to spare at San Francisco’s community college. From last fall to this spring, City College cut 710 classes of the 8,800 it planned to offer. This summer’s session has been canceled, and with it about another 860 classes were lost. One thousand six hundred and fifty-five students who tried to register in fall 2009 did not get into any classes at all, up from 635 in fall 2005, evidence that the ideal of universal access to education is increasingly unattainable.

Some City College students are now turning to other Bay Area colleges, like Laney College in Oakland, to try to fit into summer classes.

In the Continuing Student Counseling Department, Ms. McCarthy, 44, works with many students whose academic progress has slowed if not stalled. The [California State University](#) system closed the spring semester this year to students transferring in from other institutions. Shut out, City College students who had been poised to transfer find themselves in educational limbo, taking classes they do not really need, while waiting to move up to a university in the fall.

“They’re hanging out, taking up seat space,” Ms. McCarthy said in her office on the Ocean Campus. “I say that with love.”

As some students are blocked from state universities, the community college system has trouble absorbing both them and the laid-off workers who are going back to school for retraining. All are trying to fit into a community college system that lost \$520 million in state financing over the last academic year, about 8 percent of its overall budget.

“It’s a perfect storm,” said Michael W. Kirst, professor emeritus of education and business administration at [Stanford University](#). “There’s more demand and fewer courses. Four-year schools can buffer themselves from this storm by restricting enrollment and drastically increasing their tuition. The community colleges take the top 100 percent of students, whether they’re young or old.”

More students vying for fewer classes means fewer will meet their educational goals.

“The longer students cannot take the classes they want or need, the less likely it is that they will complete the program they want,” said Professor Kirst, a past president of the California State Board of Education. “They run out of money. They run out of time. They just give up at some point.”

This academic year, overall enrollment in community colleges has declined about 1 percent from last year’s record enrollment of 2.89 million. “We’re almost like a retail store that has more customers than it can handle,” said Jack Scott, chancellor of California Community Colleges.

City College of San Francisco lost \$13.6 million in state financing this academic year. In October, it held a garage sale and flea market to raise money to try to save classes, offering donated items like bicycles, golf clubs and books. That effort preserved just two classes.

Donations boxes at the college’s Ocean Campus bookstore and cafeteria are now soliciting cash and checks to help restore more classes in the fall. In three weeks, students, faculty and staff members and administrators have pitched in \$7,000.

Even with all the cutbacks, the academic program has done better than services, like counseling. “Sacramento disproportionately cut student services,” said Lindy McKnight, City College’s dean of counseling and student support.

An effect of the counseling reductions is student confusion about which classes to take, potentially delaying their progress.

Andrew Todd, 21, a computer science major at City College, has also studied at California Polytechnic State University and Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, making it harder to figure out which classes will count toward a bachelor’s degree at San Francisco State, where he hopes to enroll.

“I’ve been trying to talk to counselors about this,” Mr. Todd said. Yet, only once this semester has he met with one, and that was for a 15-minute drop-in session. “I haven’t been able to lay out an educational plan,” he said.

Mr. Todd counted on taking classes at City College this summer, but now he is looking for a full-time summer job.

Christa Collins, 35, had an associate’s degree from Richland College in Dallas when she came to City College in 2008 to complete requirements for transferring to San Francisco State to study health education. Her goal is a master’s degree in social work.

“I’m stuck here at City College,” Ms. Collins said. An administrative mix-up with her out-of-state transcript prevented Ms. Collins’s admission to San Francisco State last fall. Then, the California State University system closed spring admission.

“It’s been really hard to keep the momentum towards finishing my degree because I’ve had doors slammed in my face,” said Ms. Collins, who has lived in San Francisco for more than a decade, working in sales for a skin-care company and as a waitress.

Stymied, Ms. Collins sought advice from Ms. McCarthy.

“She is the one who helped me figure out that there were a couple of classes I could take so I am not just completely spinning my wheels, wasting time,” Ms. Collins said. Just three of the eight classes she took from last fall to this spring are transferable toward her degree.

Ms. McCarthy and other counselors have less time to help students like Ms. Collins. At City College, more than 10,000 counseling hours have been cut this academic year. Counseling is no longer offered on Friday. Only very limited counseling will be available this summer when students register for fall classes.

During “Xpress Counseling” hours, when students can drop in for sessions of 10 or 15 minutes, Ms. McCarthy finds herself saying “I’m sorry” a lot because there is rarely time to answer all their questions. Her hourlong counseling appointments are booked weeks in advance. “We’re trying to figure out which way to go, but we’re just busy bailing water out of the boat, so we’re not sinking,” she said.

One of three children of a single, disabled mother, Ms. McCarthy was the first in her own family to get a college degree. Like many of those she counsels, she took a meandering path through higher education. After high school, Ms. McCarthy attended a community college in Los Angeles, where she was put on academic probation.

Years later, after stints cleaning houses and selling cars, working in a candy factory and behind a hotel front desk, Ms. McCarthy came to City College, where a counselor inspired her to go on to become one herself, transferring to San Francisco State, where she received both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. “I’m a product of community colleges,” she said.

Ms. McCarthy remains hopeful about the future of public education: “I’m forever an optimist. I think Sacramento has got to figure it out.”

A version of this article appeared in print on April 9, 2010, on page A17A of the National edition.