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Big Enrollment Jump Strains State's Community Colleges

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Pressure is growing on the state's community colleges as heavy enrollment continues in an ailing economy.

As of mid-July, enrollment at the 12 community campuses had increased about 10 percent over the same time last year. The numbers range from a 0.7 percent increase at Capital Community College to about 41 percent at recently renovated Three Rivers Community College in Norwich.

The five-year trend of enrollment increases at a time when the state can promise little or no new funding presents a huge challenge to a system that has long stood as an inexpensive portal to higher education.

"At some point in time, there's no room in the inn, and the colleges are really, really struggling with that," said Paul Susen, chief academic and student affairs officer for the Connecticut Community College system.

It's too soon to tell what final fall enrollment will be, but in-demand classes at some colleges are full and students are being turned away. At the same time, funding for campus operations has been cut and bonding for expansions will be tough or impossible to get as huge state deficits loom.

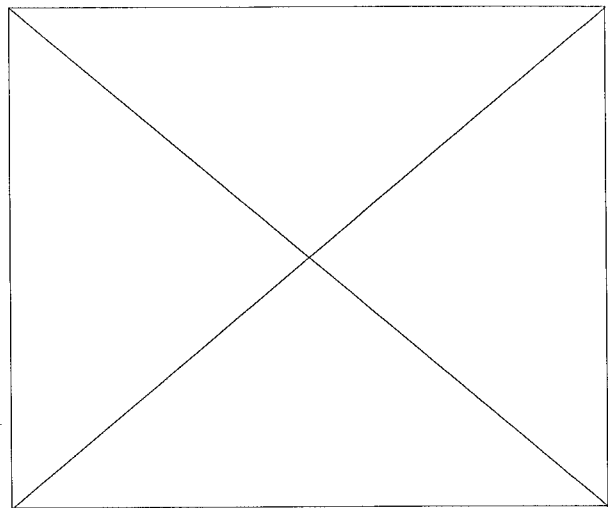
State Higher Education Commissioner Michael P. Meotti said that community colleges will have to find creative ways to accommodate a continuing influx of larger numbers of students.

"This is not a trend line that I think will stop anytime soon," Meotti said. "I think it will continue year after year. We have to realize that rolling out the status quo approach cannot be sustained any longer."

Continuing a steady climb, community college enrollment spiked last fall to a record total of 55,112 students. The colleges had a hard time handling that many students, Susen said, and if the enrollment trend this summer continues through September, about 60,500 students will be crowding community colleges this fall. At the same time, the state block grant for the colleges has remained the same — about \$158 million — since the 2008-09 academic year.

"That's why I'm really, really worried about the idea of taking 10 percent more students, on top of the almost 10 percent more students we took last year," Susen said. "Last year, they struggled. This year

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they are really going to struggle."

Many of the new students are recent high school graduates who realize they need more skills to land a good job, said Mary Anne Cox, assistant chancellor of the community college system. And as the stale economy limits employment opportunities, people are headed back to school to learn new skills, Cox and other officials said.

Also making community colleges more attractive are admissions agreements guaranteeing that students who earn associate degrees and meet certain requirements will be admitted to any of the Connecticut state universities and three schools at the University of Connecticut. Although some of these programs have been around since the 1990s, Susen said that in the past three years, the agreements have become more "comprehensive" and "student-friendly."

At Tunxis Community College, dean of student affairs Kirk Peters said that the college had to suspend registration last August because "we ran out of seats." This year, registration is running 25 percent ahead of the same time last year, and Peters said that more students, especially new students, might be turned away.

Manchester Community College officials had the same message after seeing a spike in applications this year compared with 2009. Many fall courses are full or nearly full, including several art, biology and chemistry classes and 200-level courses in English, math, allied health programs and criminal justice, college spokeswoman Endia DeCordova said in an e-mail.

Cathy Crossgrove, 20, of Storrs, said she's pursuing an associate's degree in general studies at Manchester Community mainly because of the cost. The average cost for each semester at a community college is about \$1,700, compared with \$10,416 for tuition and fees at the University of Connecticut.

"Four-year colleges are way more expensive than I can afford," Crossgrove said. "I live in Storrs, but I don't have the money to go to UConn."

She and other students said they have found that registering as early as possible is necessary to get the classes they want.

The increasing enrollment bodes well for state businesses, said Judy Resnick, executive director of the Connecticut Business and Industry Association's education foundation. The two-year colleges are attuned to the needs of area businesses, Resnick said, and business owners will stay and expand in areas where they know they can find skilled workers. Also, Resnick said, community colleges attract many students who seek focused programs — nuclear technician training, for example, at Three Rivers.

"There are direct ties to certain industries," Resnick said.

Doing More With Less

Last fall, total enrollment at Three Rivers was 4,561 students. As of mid-July, 3,138 students were signed up. If the pace continues, Rozek said she's not sure what will happen. She expects that the college will continue to get more creative about class scheduling. Already, Three Rivers offers Friday night and Saturday classes, as well as classes that will start later in the fall. Manchester Community College will offer early-morning classes — beginning at 6:30 a.m. — to accommodate more students this fall.

Other ways to handle the influx, Meotti said, include online courses and using space in the evenings at nearby schools. When Manchester Community College started, he noted, classes were taught at night at

Manchester High School.

The ballooning enrollments are due in part to improvements and expansions funded by state bonds, Susen said, but getting that money now and in the foreseeable future will be much more difficult, he and other officials said.

Community colleges are, per-capita, "the most poorly funded of the higher education units," said state Sen. Mary Anne Handley, co-chairwoman of the legislature's higher education committee. "This kind of growth has to be a wake-up call to how we do this funding."

"I think it's a policy issue," Handley said. "We are going to have to take a look at the way in which our public higher education facilities are being used."

A focus on maintaining faculty is probably more important now than thinking about any new construction, she said.

"The physical issues, I would say, particularly given the probable lack of support for capital expansion right now ... are less critical than the staff and the support services needed to maintain the appropriate level of instruction and guidance for the students," Handley said.

State Rep. Roberta Willis, the other co-chairwoman of the higher education committee, said it's important to provide needed additional resources to community colleges because the schools "are one of the things that help pull us out of a recession. They are putting people back to work and they are giving them new job skills."

"The bottom line," Willis said, "is we need to recognize the role that community colleges play and that it's an investment worth making with a payback, which is getting people prepared for the jobs that are out there."

Meotti said that burgeoning enrollment "sends a message to the state's top decision-makers that community colleges play this incredibly vital role in terms of people trying to meet their aspirations. The numbers are evidence of people voting with their feet."

"The point at which the president says to a student, 'I can no longer provide you a quality experience' — that's just a very, very difficult call for the president," Susen said, "and we may hit that point at more colleges than not."

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