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Community Colleges Confront A Surge In Enrollment

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"Film studies 30111?" asked Eric Mogor, hopefully, of a registrar's assistant at Manchester Community College on Tuesday. A freshman, he was hunting for a fourth course to complete his schedule.

"Let me see ..." responded the assistant. "That class is full."

"What about 30775?"

"That's full."

"30774?"

"Full."

That's how it's been at community colleges throughout the state in the past few weeks. The weakened economy, the tail end of a demographic bulge in young adults and the increasing recognition of the need for post-high school education had converged by late August to swell enrollment figures by 10.9 percent in the state's community college system compared with a year ago. ([Pictures: Students At Manchester Community College](#))

That percentage is expected to grow to 12 percent when all students are counted.

With tuition and fees a comparative bargain at \$3,200 a year, the community colleges have become a popular choice for budget-minded students whether fresh out of high school or transferring from a more costly private or state school. Unemployed people who need to retrain and working people who want to expand their skills also are enrolling. Although the colleges offer a typical liberal arts curriculum, they also offer many occupationally oriented degrees and certificates that quickly improve a student's chance of employment.

The state's late August enrollment figures showed these percentage increases from a year ago: 10.3 percent for Manchester Community College; 5.2 percent for Tunxis Community College; 7.5 percent for Capital Community College; 18.8 percent for Housatonic Community College; and 17 percent for Three Rivers Community College.

The 12 community colleges are further squeezed because they lost 191 employees, including more than 70 faculty members, to the state's retirement incentive program earlier this summer. Without a state budget this summer — the budget wasn't settled until last week — college administrators have not been sure how many of those faculty could be replaced.

"Some of the colleges are coming to the breaking point as to when they are going to have to close enrollment because they won't have seats in classes," said Mary Anne Cox, assistant chancellor of the state's community college system. "This is particularly difficult because ... we are supposed to keep the doors to higher education open, particularly in this difficult time in the economy with people out of jobs, coming back to higher education to become more skilled employees."

Indeed, some college administrators like those at Tunxis Community College had to shut down enrollment for those new students seeking the jam-packed classes that are key to the community college mission — developmental courses designed to get students ready for college-level work. The general introductory courses at many community colleges have also filled up before the end of registration. So, too, have courses in science and medical-related topics; computer courses; criminal justice and others.

Lucretia Holley, associate director of admissions at Tunxis, said that last-minute new students were "shocked to say the least" when they heard they could not enroll because there were no openings in the entry-level courses they needed.

The students asked: "Well, what am I supposed to do now and what do you mean?" Holley said. "So we gave them options ... to get everything set up now for spring semester" or to check out another community college.

Holley said there are always courses that fill up early, "but in my history here of nearly 20 years, I've never seen students closed completely out" from the introductory college-preparatory classes.

Mary Ann Affleck, academic dean at Capital Community College, said: "We have turned people away — not in the sense that we're saying, 'I'm sorry, go away.' In the sense that the classes they want at the times they want them are full. ... In my 20-plus years, we've not had this level of demand."

Affleck said she is also concerned because the situation inevitably favors those who have the money for tuition over those who must wait for financial aid. A student with money can come in and sign up for courses early on; financial aid students might sign up for courses but then be "de-registered" if their financial aid does not come through soon enough, leaving them scrambling for courses at the last minute.

To cope with the galloping enrollments, colleges are hiring adjuncts and adding sections when budget and space will allow; increasing the number of students in some classes if professors agree; holding classes in conference rooms and auditoriums and possibly next semester at one

college, in an art gallery; increasing on-line offerings; renting parking spaces in a nearby lot or using fields for parking; and increasing night and weekend offerings.

Some students, meanwhile, are finding themselves stuck with classes they don't want or need or having to take courses scheduled at inconvenient times.

Heather McSweeney, who is in her second year at Tunxis Community College, didn't get in to choose her classes until the last days of registration. "There was one spot left in this math class — I said, 'OK, I'll take it.'" She wanted to take public speaking or an English composition class, but wound up with only business courses.

At Manchester Community College, Andreá Baker, a first-year student from Manchester, returned to the registrar's window about six times on Tuesday as he tried to find courses. But, the criminal justice, film appreciation, water-color painting and other classes he wanted were all full. Instead, he has courses in geography, business, and drug addiction, and he's still looking for a fourth. Although he wanted daytime classes, most of his classes are scheduled at night, including Friday night. He also has a Saturday morning class.

By Tuesday afternoon, he had developed a migraine and had to go home, missing his first class on drug addiction at 4 p.m. "I was waiting in line just for them to tell me the classes were full," said Baker. "I was kind of frustrated and annoyed."

Visit courant.com/colleges to view photos of students at Manchester Community College.

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