

COMMENTARY

Cuts to California's Higher Education System

Consequences for First-Generation College Students

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Continuing two decades of declining state support for higher education, Brown has proposed cutting \$500 million each from the [University of California](#) and [California State University](#) systems, and \$400 million from community colleges. These cuts are expected to lead to increased fees and reduced enrollment. Community college students' fees would climb from \$26 per credit unit to \$36.

California Community Colleges System chancellor [Jack Scott](#) has predicted that an estimated 350,000 students could be turned away from community colleges. The large cuts to California's higher education system come after [a recent statewide survey](#) conducted by the [Public Policy Institute of California \(PPIC\)](#), that found that 74% of Californians say the state does not provide enough money for colleges and universities. The study also found that most Californians (68%) believe that spending for public higher education should be given a high or very high priority—with 57% favoring spending more on higher education even at the expense of other programs. In addition, 49% favor paying higher taxes to maintain current funding, an increase of 8% from last year. Only 35% of Californians favor raising student fees to maintain current funding.

[News of Brown's proposal to make deep cuts in higher education](#) has stirred deep concerns about the uncertain future of students who are the first in their family to earn a college degree, most of which are enrolled in the CSU and Community College systems. Of the 2.8 million community college students, approximately 45% or 1.3 million are first-generation college students. Of the 433,000 students enrolled at the CSU system, 35%, or 121,550 are also first-generation students.

Overall, the budget cuts mean that the two key institutions that serve as a path for upward socioeconomic mobility for these students will be greatly limited in their ability to provide college access, retention, and graduation to approximately 1.5 million California students. Cuts will not only lead to increased tuition and reduced enrollment, but would possibly lead to layoffs, furloughs, fewer classes, and other service reductions. In essence, it will get even harder to gain admissions to higher education, particularly for first-generation students pursuing a B.A. degree in the CSU system, since a large percentage of these students transfer from Community Colleges.

In fall of 2008, about 42% of students entering the CSU began their academic careers at the community college. Additionally, programs and services like child care, veteran's offices, financial aid, academic counseling, and advising support, that help students successfully engage while in college, may be eliminated. Access and retention programs like the [Educational Opportunity Program](#) or [Summer Bridge](#) that provide support services to low-income, first-generation college students that often play a critical role in helping students complete their B.A. degree could be cut. The scaling back of counseling services and the reduction of class offerings spells trouble for first-generation students who are unfamiliar with institutions of higher education.

With more affluent students being forced out of the UC's and into the CSU's, first-generation minority students will find themselves competing with peers who are better able to navigate the education system. In that competition, it's easy to predict that some of the neediest students will be further disadvantaged. The budget cuts to higher education will undoubtedly increase the concern about college access.

The PPIC survey revealed that only 26% of Californians think the vast majority of people qualified to go to college are able to do so, and 71% say many people don't have the opportunity. An overwhelming majority (73%) think the price of a college education keeps students who are qualified and motivated from attending and 74% say students must borrow too much money to pay for a college education. Concern is especially high among Latino parents, with 72% very worried about being able to pay for college—up 19 points since 2007.

Unfortunately, the concerns are not unwarranted. The proposed reduction in state support for colleges and universities is a “best case” scenario; because it assumes an extension of temporary tax increases due to expire at the end of the fiscal year. The governor is seeking to hold a special election in June to ask voters to extend the taxes, which would provide approximately \$10 billion in revenue for California. However, if the tax extensions do not pass, schools may face additional reductions beyond the proposed \$1.4 billion cut for 2011–2012.

Although the consequences of the budget cuts for first-generation college students are still unknown, we must ensure that they are not disproportionately affected. Policies and budget cut decisions need to consider their particular challenges.

Will the budget cuts result in the most impoverished students being locked out of higher education or unable to complete their degrees? Will these students turn to private-for-profit colleges where they will face high college-loan debts and low-graduation rates? What kinds of policy solutions do we need to develop if these alarming trends begin to emerge?

The PPIC survey suggests one possible approach. It found that 72% of Californians favor having a sliding scale for tuition and fee costs so that students would pay according to family income. We must explore this proposal and other policy options that will support college access and completion for low-income, first-generation college students to ensure the future economic and civic vitality of California.

Suggested citation

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