

## Weak economy spurs growth for community colleges

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RICHMOND, Va. -- Two-year community colleges are seeing record enrollment as families squeezed by tough economic times steer high school graduates away from more expensive four-year universities.

While the shift solves one funding problem, it potentially raises another. Community college officials in some states, including Texas and Virginia, are concerned the precarious nature of their own finances — brought about by rising costs and state government budget shortfalls — could limit their ability to handle the anticipated influx of new students.

Preliminary reports from community colleges across the nation, which had overall enrollment of 11.5 million last year, show summer enrollments increased, a trend predicted to extend into the fall, according to Norma Kent, a spokeswoman for the American Association of Community Colleges.

Kent said the trend is in line with other economic downturns. Community colleges see increased demand for their workforce-training programs from people who have been laid off or are in search of additional skills.

Nineteen-year-old Whitney Daniels of Mathews, Va., had hoped to attend a four-year state school this fall, but the recent stock market downturn diminished her family's college fund, making Rappahannock Community College a better alternative, at least for the short term.

The Daniels family had \$20,000 in a college fund for Whitney, but the account's value has fallen enough that a four-year school would be out of the question without student loans — an option that was unappealing to her mother, Debbie.

"We're approaching retirement in the next six to seven years," Debbie Daniels said. "I don't want to get heavily in debt."

It costs \$2,585 in tuition and fees annually for 30 credit hours at RCC, compared with an average of \$14,841 for tuition and fees plus room and board for an in-state student at a public four-year school in Virginia.

Nationwide, the average annual cost of attending community college is \$2,361, compared with \$6,185 in tuition and fees for an in-state public school. Average annual room and board at a public four-year school is \$7,404, according to the most recent figures from the College Board, which tracks average tuition costs.

It's figures like these that are driving more students toward community colleges.

— In Virginia, community college officials anticipate more than 160,000 in-state students will enroll in the fall, up from last fall's enrollment of slightly more than 157,000 students. Two out of every three new undergraduates will enroll in community colleges, said Jeffrey Kraus, a spokesman for the Virginia Community College System.

— In Cabarrus County, N.C., where Philip Morris USA Inc. is preparing to shut down a tobacco plant in three years, nearby Rowan-Cabarrus Community College is working with the company to let employees take classes in computers, Spanish and other fields to develop skills to find new jobs, according to Jeanie Moore, the school's vice president of continuing education.

— In Texas, the state's 50 two-year schools are seeing more students mainly because of population growth, said Steven Johnson, a spokesman for the Texas Association of Community Colleges. The state's economy is somewhat more insulated from the current downturn because of the booming oil industry, he said.

The bulk of federal higher-education funding goes to four-year schools, yet two-year schools enroll almost half the nation's undergraduates, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Salaries and

infrastructure costs are higher at four-year schools, but community college officials say they've long been expected to do more with less.

At least 30 states have budget shortages, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the rising costs of energy and other operating expenses will likely make education funding tougher.

Community colleges on average get 60 percent of their funding from state and local sources. As a result, if states are having trouble, community college funding could dwindle, Kent said.

"It's a perfect storm in a negative sense," she said.

Virginia's General Assembly allocated \$396.5 million for the state's community college system in the 2009 fiscal year, up just 2 percent from \$387.2 million in the current fiscal year. It allocated \$24.4 million for financial aid for community college students. But Gov. Timothy M. Kaine this week warned legislators that worsening state finances require deep budget cuts by early October — including to areas traditionally off-limits.

In Texas, state funding hasn't kept up with enrollment growth, Johnson said. Community colleges in Texas receive less than 30 percent of their funding from the state, down from 60 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Central Oregon Community College in Bend is seeing a 31 percent enrollment increase, but officials expect that to moderate, saying they are running out of classroom space and faculty to meet capacity.

Because two-year schools are intended to be open-access institutions, it's anathema to turn students away. But "if there's not enough faculty, not enough courses, we have a de facto enrollment cap," Kent said.

Sarah Turcotte, of Gloucester, Va., says she's attending RCC while many of her friends are leaving or have left for college. While she acknowledges feeling a bit left out, she hopes to join a couple of them at the University of Virginia as a transfer student in a couple years if she keeps her grades up.

"The school that I want to go to is a state school, but it's \$17,000" annually for tuition and fees and housing and dining, she said, compared with \$800 a semester for RCC, and living at her parents' home.

A study released Wednesday by educational loan provider Sallie Mae shows that many people fail to consider post-college income in determining how to pay for school, but Turcotte is already looking ahead to after graduation, when many people are saddled with repaying student loans.

"With the economy the way it is, college grads are finding a hard time finding jobs, so it's best to keep my education costs to a minimum," she said.