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*A Newsletter for a New Kind of Leader*

## News

### Enrollment at Community Colleges Hits Record Levels

#### Lack of Employment and Lower Cost are Key Factors

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After losing her \$45,000-a-year job as an administrative assistant in Kentucky last September, Grace Elizabeth Hanser (pictured at left) could not find a position that paid more than \$10 an hour. So she decided to improve her chances in the job market by enrolling at Gateway Community and Technical College – at the age of 58.

"I don't think I need to reinvent myself," says Hanser, who plans on earning a degree in business and accounting. "I think I just needed to reevaluate what I needed to do to progress."

Hanser is part of a wave of new students who have driven enrollment at community colleges nationwide to record levels this spring. The increase in enrollment for the spring semester ranges from 5 percent at Nassau Community College in Garden City, N.Y. to 21 percent at Gateway Community and Technical College in Covington, Ky.

"Normally in the spring, you would see a slight decrease in incoming students," said Sean Fanelli, president of Nassau Community College. "Like any other school, for whatever reason – maybe academics – they're not prepared for college."

Yet community college presidents report students are choosing to enroll midyear, either because they have lost employment or they cannot afford the cost of a four-year college. Other students who do not want to wait for a two-year degree are filling classes by signing up for certificate programs in areas such as paralegal training or auto mechanics.

"What's clear is in a down economy, enrollment goes up and the prominence of community colleges becomes more pronounced," said Mark David Milliron, president and chief executive officer of Catalyze Learning International, an educational consulting firm in Newland, N.C. "In many ways, community colleges are in the eye of the storm."

In several states, community colleges have developed programs that grant tuition waivers to students who

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have been recently laid off. At Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Pa., 80 displaced workers are now enrolled in a program in which the college has offered 12 free tuition credits. And the community college system in Kentucky is waiving 50 percent of tuition for up to six credit hours per semester for workers who have lost jobs since Oct. 1.

"My admissions people have told me the phones are ringing off the hook," said G. Edward Hughes, president and chief executive officer at Gateway Community and Technical College. "We are getting them into school as quickly as we can. They need some hope. When you lose your job and your career, you really lose hope."

While laid-off workers are turning to community colleges for retraining, the majority of the new students enrolling this spring are those who have just graduated from high school. "This increase seems to be exclusively 18- and 19-year-olds who are choosing to come here because of cost," said David Hartleb, president of Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Mass.

The average annual cost for a private four-year college for the 2008-09 academic year is \$25,143, while the pricetag for a public four-year college is \$6,585, according to the College Board. A public two-year-college costs an average of \$2,402.

One student who decided that a four-year private college was just too expensive is Carmine Sarno, who transferred to Nassau Community College this spring after one semester at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y. Sarno, who wants to become a high school English teacher, figured he would end up with a \$20,000 loan if he had stayed at Hofstra.

"I thought my parents would end up saving a lot of money by my doing this, said Sarno, 19. "If I end up transferring back to Hofstra, I still get the same degree and diploma than if I had stayed at Hofstra for four years."

The influx of students like Sarno comes at a time when many community colleges are facing at best a freeze in state aid, or at worst a cut in state spending. The funding constraints, moreover, are placing pressure on schools that need to hire more faculty to teach additional sections of classes.

"Most community colleges are able to absorb the increase in student enrollment," said Gerardo E. de los Santos, president and chief executive officer of the League for Innovation in the Community College in Phoenix, Ariz. "Yet there are some that, due the severe nature of the statewide budget crises and the fact that such a large percentage of their budget is being slashed, they don't have the capacity to grow. It's the typical cliché — having to serve more and do more with considerably less support and less funding."

Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, Md., which saw a 7 percent increase in student enrollment this spring, has dealt with the additional students by increasing online courses and using school buildings during non-peak hours, said Martha A. Smith, the college's president. Last fall, the college began WEEKENDYOU, a program in which students can earn an associate degree or a certificate program on weekends.

Despite the fiscal constraints, many community college presidents said they are gratified that their schools serve as focal points for retraining and higher education at a time when a college degree is needed more than ever.

"I think community colleges will play a critical role in the retooling of the American workforce," said Hughes, the president of Gateway. "What we know about the jobs in the future is that about 80 percent will require some form of post-secondary education less than a bachelor's degree, and that's a community college."

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