

Will community colleges boot some community members?

By Spencer Michels, PBS News Hour

A hundred or so students made a ruckus recently at Santa Monica College, and – unlike many student protests – they achieved their goals. In the face of a noisy demonstration and disapproval from the state, the college administration backed down on tuition increases it had proposed, that would have boosted the cost per unit from \$46 to \$200 for some popular courses needed for graduation. Santa Monica, a community college, was alone in trying to implement what was called a two-tier system, which would have charged a premium for courses much in demand. That plan would have favored wealthier students, and hurt those who couldn't afford the premium – in a system where cutbacks in funding have forced many colleges to drastically reduce course offerings. Students have been complaining more and more that they can't get the classes they need. Santa Monica thought it had a way to address that, but the opposition was too great.

Community colleges are in the midst of a major re-make, especially in California, and the turmoil at Santa Monica was a symptom of the turmoil. The system is enormous; nationwide 13 million students are enrolled, and in California alone, 2.6 million students attend, making the state system, with 122 campuses, the largest higher educational institution in the nation. The schools serve a variety of students: those who need a boost to get up to college level; those who want to learn a vocation; those who want to just learn without regard to a degree; and those who need to beef up their English skills. Community colleges have been called the backbone of the nation's education system, where almost anyone – regardless of income or educational level – can attend, the place where the nation can win or lose its competitive

struggle with other countries, especially in technology.

Read the whole story