

Survive and Thrive in the Budget Cuts – a few ideas for kicks!

Article By:

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Abstract:

Despite the historical fiscal crisis faced by California community colleges, we should maintain a positive attitude and deploy strategies not just to survive the crisis, but to thrive in it. Some ideas mentioned in the article include Tell Our Story, Focus on Student Needs, Energize Student Services, Seek Local Revenue, Marketing, Negotiate Service Contracts, and continuing with Planning at all levels.

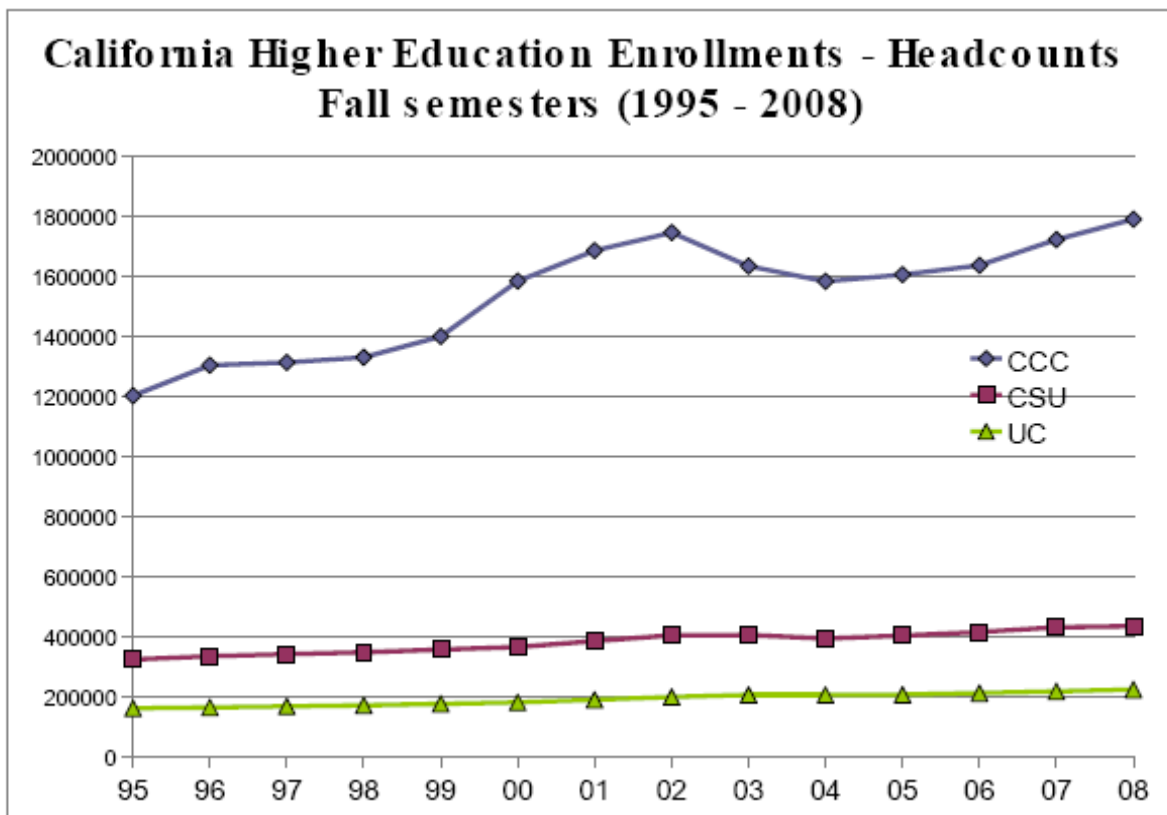
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The final tally from the damage to the public sector brought on by the unprecedented economic downturn will remain unknown for a while. However, one thing is clear: it has produced a fast and furious hurricane aimed squarely at the survival of community colleges. According to a study by the California School Boards Association, it was observed that “between 1929 and 1935, during the Great Depression, California made cuts of 25% to public education”. In comparison, in as short as 2 years time (2008 to 2010), reductions to public education in California totaled 20%, and will likely reach 25% in 2011.

In normal years, the community colleges are always on a shoe string budget with funding that pales in comparison to any other education segments in the state. Funding per full-time student is strikingly inadequate for community colleges when the state provides \$18,000 to teach a University of California (UC) student, \$12,000 for a California State University (CSU) student, and even \$8,000 for K-12, but only \$5,800 for a full-time community college student (Community College League, 2009).

There is also a huge disparity in the number of students served by the higher education institutions. In 2008-09, CSUs educated 440,000 students and UCs 220,000. Meanwhile, California's community colleges educated over 2.6 million students. At the UCs, there were 1.2 students per faculty/staff member. At the CSUs, it was 9.4, on average. At California's community colleges, it was over 30 to 1. From 1995 to now, UC/CSU headcounts have remained relatively flat, while enrollments in community colleges have exploded. See figure in link below:

Figure 1:



Source: <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/OnLineData/MiningOptions.ASP>

A silver lining appeared at the national level when the Obama administration recognized the important role community colleges play in national and regional economies by proposing \$12 billion over the next 10 years with the goal to increase additional 5 million graduates.

Despite the deeply ingrained inequality in our state funding and the historical budget cuts, in life, attitude is everything. We must know that we will survive this crisis and if we remain optimistic, setting our vision on a bigger and better future, we will emerge to be stronger than before. To do this, here are a few ideas to ponder just for kicks.

- **Tell Our Story** – It is worth repeating that chances are high the next time they come to our rescue, these paramedics, firefighters and police officers are graduates from community colleges. The nurses, the bank tellers, the car mechanics, the accountants, or the teachers whose work we depend on are most likely graduates from community colleges. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported 1 in 5 Americans who earned a doctorate in 2008 had attended a community college . Community college alumni and graduates are everywhere! The health of community colleges is directly linked to the health of the middle class America – a pillar of our modern society. In

addition, community colleges are the most efficient educational enterprise and the most economical way of accessing higher education. When I was giving a speech in China about the fact that the majority of students of color are enrolled in community colleges and there is a disparity in funding, an audience member stood up and commented “it seems to me your focus on helping your minorities is noble, but lacks real and genuine support – money. How do you eliminate inequality in education and race without first eliminating financial inequality?”

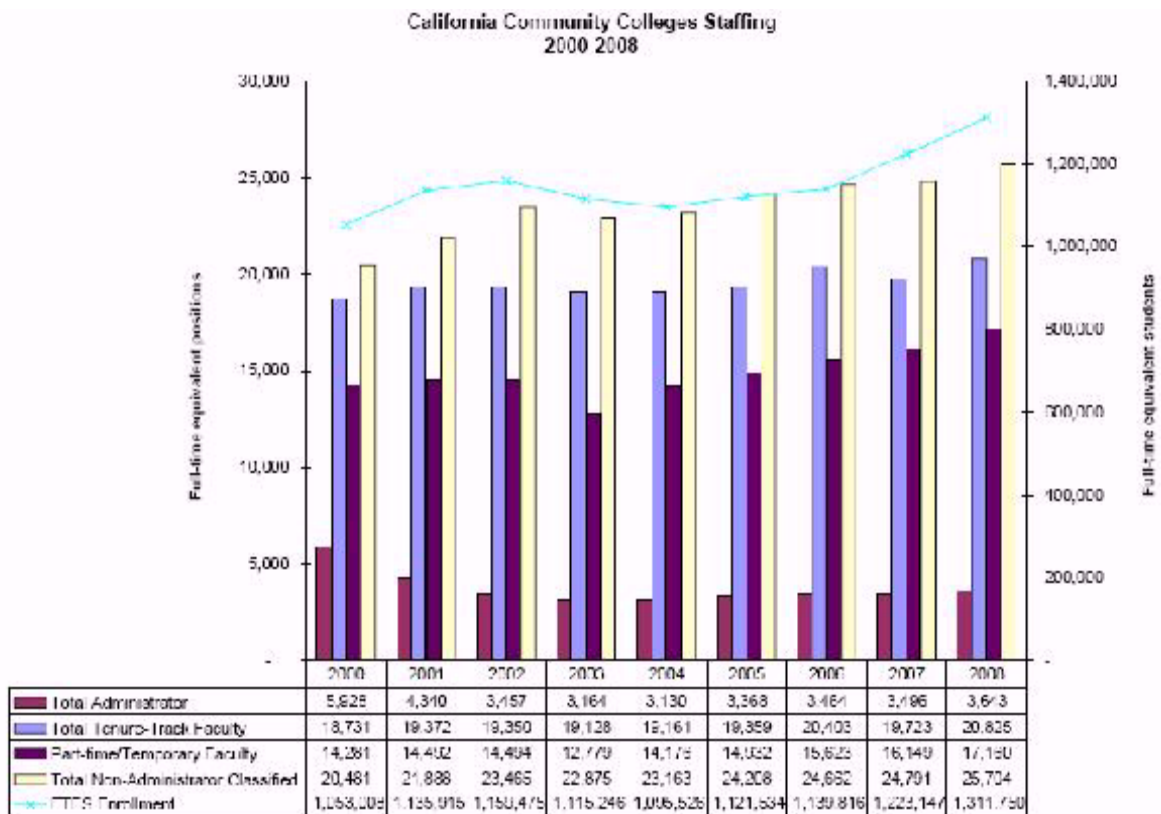
- **Unite** –Only through unity can we demonstrate a show of force to the state legislature in support of public education, such as what we witnessed at the recent March in March efforts, where faculty, administration, staff, and students joined in unity. It certainly felt like a Million Student March! It would have been nice to see the involvement from community college alumni – a silent but large voting bloc. When it comes to surviving the crisis, there are no fundamental differences among various constituent groups, except those who need the most help: students!

- **Focus on Student Needs** – while we are spending every working hour attempting to save or cut our budget, we must focus on student needs. If they need more financial aid, we may try to reduce the size of large awards, scholarships for example, and spread the money to more students, particularly those who are at the lowest income level where a dollar goes a long way; if they want more distance education, we should try to open more sections. Remember, while incoming high school graduates may have low academic preparedness (as high as 70% are placed into below transfer level classes) , they have high technology proclivity and skills that makes technology assisted classes more appealing to them. This generation of students, known for wanting instant gratification, may relate very well to high tech high touch approach.

- **Plan, Plan, Plan** – the best plans are laid in a crisis. What is our vision? Is it sharper than before the crisis? Are our values being tested and challenged? What are our enrollment management strategies? (Yes, it is still important to discuss enrollment management when we are flooded with students!) Have we become better at linking budget to planning through the brute force of a bad economy? Are we more able than before to articulate goals and develop efficient and effective strategies to accomplishment them? How to avoid the next economic bump in the road, which seems to appear more frequently?

- **Energize Student Services** – The overall administrative growth has been stunted and decreasing (see figure below), and student services has been especially devastated by the budget cuts in our system.

Figure 2



Source: <http://www.ccleague.net/updates/staffingglance.pdf>

Student services offices are overstretched and overloaded. And yet, from my own visits to these offices, I found these consummate professionals are still able to put a smile on their services to students. It is appropriate now to adapt to the changed environment by relying more on technology, by consolidating services in multi-college districts; and by simplifying placement testing. Technology can mean the use of online counseling and orientation, wider use of email/web to access records and the use of digital publications to replace paper. In addition, with increased student mobility, it is hard to justify the existence of a large number of locally developed placement tests - if each doctor uses a different measure for blood pressure, it is impossible to provide standard and quality care. Our district's Student Services Leadership Team has responded to the challenges by developing cost saving strategies, standardizing and consolidating back office operations. To quote one of our Trustees, the students have benefited "...not only with the achievement of consistency in processes and efficiency, but also with the improved quality of student services..."

- **Seek Local Revenue** – Community colleges are increasingly becoming community based. Community colleges "were previously funded by the State, recently supported by the State, and

now merely located in the State.” Currently, the sentiments among community residents are strong toward local control, which opens the door for funding streams like a parcel tax, or even general obligation bond possibilities. Further, local residents may be more interested than before to support students through planned giving as reported by our Foundation. While everyone is cutting their travel budget, they become more interested in community events for which community colleges have quite a history of providing. Events like jazz concerts, alumni reunions, festivals, summer cookouts; all help connect the colleges with the community. Our district built a state-of-the-art athletic facility, the San Mateo Athletic Club, with membership opportunities open to the general public. Closer connection with the community is essential to seeking local support.

- **Negotiate / Renew Service Contracts** – In the investment world, contrarians (not necessarily short sellers) tend to make the biggest gain. That is because they seek opportunities that a thriving economy does not present. This is the time to consider, against the grain, to aggressively negotiate service contracts with vendors. My office led some of the efforts that resulted in obtaining on average 50% off normal contracts, saving the district close to \$100,000 in the first year.

- **Hold on to the UC/CSU Redirects** – in regular years, we demur at AP students’ lack of interest in community colleges who bypass us on their way to a university. This time around, a lot of these students are unwillingly redirected back to the community colleges. This gives us a great opportunity that is truly historical. We should use this opportunity to make sure they get the best transfer education. If we can impress them with a quality education that includes outstanding student services for a fraction of what it costs in a 4-year institution, we may have secured a generation of new students.

- **Marketing** –Malcolm Gladwell described the “tipping point” as the pinnacle at which a game changer is set in place. (Gladwell, 2003) With classes being filled at unprecedented rates and thousands of students remaining on waitlists in our colleges, has the enrollment reached a tipping point for community colleges? In my opinion, it has not. The current enrollments are a result of the economy, not our own doing. As soon as companies start hiring, we are back in the game of chasing after headcounts. Marketing is (A) about getting the word out and (B) about brand or name recognition. A New York Times article recently described how for-profit trade schools have lured students who are paying up to \$40,000 for a two-year degree through questionable marketing and recruitment tactics. We should use ethical marketing to continue branding ourselves, so students will remember us. Our district colleges have worked hard to

brand ourselves and to provide reader friendly information with career programs matched against local jobs and earning power. **For an example, please click here (<http://www.smccd.edu/careers>).**

With continued budget cutting pressure bearing down on us from all angles, it is inhuman not to feel distracted if not devastated. I lean on Abraham Lincoln who once quoted a biblical phrase “This too shall pass”. Therefore, to make sure of a better tomorrow, we should start positioning ourselves strategically by setting our goals on the future. Short term, we may work on surviving the days and weeks ahead by continuing to fulfill student needs and, as Rahm Emanuel said “Let no crisis go unexploited.” After the storm is over, we should envision the long term exciting landscape of serving students. In closing, I lean on my cultural background for a most appropriate observation: “the Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters: crisis and opportunity” and in that order, too.

Endnotes: