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AS WE SEE IT

Roadblocks to success

*State may pull trigger on
more community college cuts*

Is it possible to put an even bigger hurt on community colleges and public universities in California?

We may soon find out.

Just two months ago, Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature approved a 2011-2012 budget that did not include any tax hikes, but did depend on optimistic projections about future revenue.

It hasn't taken long to realize that optimism was misplaced. State revenue for July came in \$539 million below the budget projections, according to state Controller John Chiang.

When the current budget was crafted in late June, the spending plan contained so-called "triggers" that would be squeezed if revenue came in \$1 billion less than projected — which seems likely considering the early returns. With a weak economy and continuing high joblessness, the outlook for the Golden State is hardly lustrous.

The impact for the CSU and UC systems has been much discussed — higher tuition that could get even more expensive, fewer classes and students admitted, faculty layoffs.

The impact to community colleges has not received nearly as much attention.

Community colleges like Cabrillo College served 2.75 million students last year. Community colleges are not only a lower cost alternative for young people who can't afford four years at what have become increasingly unaffordable CSU and UC campuses, but also provide a high quality of undergraduate instruction, two-year certificates in fields such as nursing, and continuing education for people of all ages.

If mid-year cuts go through because of the budget triggers, the community college system could well cut more courses

and programs — and raise fees again. Though community college students have already seen fees go up from \$26 to \$36 this year over last, fees would spike to \$46 a unit if the system takes another big hit.

The community college system already has had its funding cut by \$400 million so far this year — and has had \$129 million delayed. The system would lose another \$72 million and CSU, which serves 412,000 students and just took a cut of \$650 million, another \$100 million if state revenue falls more than \$1 billion below budget estimates.

One good move coming out of this funding spiral is that community colleges and CSU have been working together to improve the transfer degree system that smooths the way for more two-year students to CSU campuses.

The chancellors of both systems say they can save about \$160 million a year by making it easier for students to transfer with an associate degree after they've completed 60 units.

With the UC system, which serves 234,000 students, also facing midyear cuts after absorbing its own \$650 million drop in state funding, the risks for the state are both long term and immediate. Long term, California faces a workforce unable to compete in the global economy. Short term, workers without necessary skills will often drift onto the jobless rolls.

The school year begins again Monday at Cabrillo, where enrollment is expected to be about what it was last year. But with only 20 percent of incoming community college students expected to complete at least a two-year degree within six years, the last thing California needs to be doing is making it even harder on young people who want and need an education.