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## AS WE SEE IT

# Crowded classrooms

*Community colleges cap class drops — but retroactive provision unfair*

If you want a clearer picture of how the state's uncertain budgeting is affecting community colleges, a new policy restricting the number of times a student can take a class is a prime example.

On the face of it, the change seems entirely reasonable. In the past students at our local community college, Cabrillo, were allowed to repeat a class three times — and to withdraw from that class four times. The old policy thus gave students seven opportunities to get through a class.

But under a change implemented by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, students will only get three opportunities, total, to repeat or withdraw from a class.

Big difference.

The change wasn't made out of a concern students have been gaming the two-year college system, but for financial reasons — cutting down on demand for precious classroom seats.

The community college system has already absorbed a \$400 million reduction in state funding and, unless the state's revenue situation improves, could be asked to absorb more. Cabrillo has responded by cutting more than 450 classes in recent years. Fees have also gone up.

With the policy change, the Community Colleges Board felt more space will be opened up for students. About 33,000 community college students last year statewide had retaken a class more than five times.

But while the change won't take effect at Cabrillo until summer, it's retroactive, meaning starting then, a student's failures and withdrawals will count against the new cap.

So what's the big deal? Shouldn't a student who registers for a class be disciplined and committed enough to finish?

The easy answer is, yes, of course — but circumstances can waylay the best intentions. Beyond that, the policy change is a subtle, but significant, change in the historic mission of two-year colleges to provide higher-level and vocational education for any and all who choose to attend along with providing an affordable path to UC, CSU and other campuses. Community colleges serve a diverse student population, including many who cannot afford attending a four-year institution and opt for the lower fees and costs of staying home.

College administrators acknowledge some students will be penalized who sign up for course loads that prove unworkable for various reasons, including employment and family issues, or for others who struggle to keep up with college-level curriculum.

Cabrillo says it will tell students about the changes and that counselors will work more closely with students to avoid excessive course loads. But counselors' time is limited these days, as well.

The situation has gotten so ominous for community colleges that some are considering asking voters to approve parcel taxes to pay for basic services such as class offerings. Parcel taxes are frequently sought by K-12 school districts to pay for teacher salaries and other basic needs and some community colleges want to use them to replace reductions in state funding.

The new caps are probably the best alternative to open up classroom space in tough times. But the statewide board should drop the retroactive provision, which unfairly penalizes students who now may face educational doors closing, which doesn't make sense for a state requiring a better trained workforce.

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