The Imperiled Promise of College

NY Times

By FRANK BRUNI

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FOR a long time and for a lot of us, “college” was more or less a synonym for success. We had only to go. We had only to graduate. And if we did, according to parents and high-school guidance counselors and everything we heard and everything we read, we could pretty much count on a career, just about depend on a decent income and more or less expect security. A diploma wasn’t a piece of paper. It was an amulet.

And it was broadly accessible, or at least it was spoken of that way. With the right mix of intelligence, moxie and various kinds of aid, a motivated person could supposedly get there. College was seen as a glittering centerpiece of the American dream, a reliable engine of social mobility.

I’m not sure things were ever that simple, but they’re definitely more complicated now. And that was an unacknowledged backdrop for the pitched debate last week about federal student loan rates and whether they would be kept at 3.4 percent or allowed to return to 6.8 percent. That was one reason, among many, that it stirred up so much anxiety and got so much attention.

Because of levitating costs, college these days is a luxury item. What’s more, it’s a luxury item with newly uncertain returns.

Yes, many of the sorts of service-industry jobs now available to people without higher education are less financially rewarding than manufacturing jobs of yore, and so college has in that sense become more imperative. And, yes, college graduates have an unemployment rate half that of people with only high school degrees.

But that figure factors in Americans who got their diplomas and first entered the job market decades ago, and it could reflect not just what was studied in college but the already established economic advantages, contacts and temperaments of the kind of people who pursue and stick with higher education.

It doesn’t capture the grim reality for recent college graduates, whose leg up on their less educated counterparts isn’t such a sturdy, comely leg at the moment. According to an Associated Press analysis of data from 2011, 53.6 percent of college graduates under the age of 25 were unemployed or, if they were lucky, merely underemployed, which means they were in jobs for which their degrees weren’t necessary. Philosophy majors mull questions no more existential than the proper billowiness of the foamed milk atop a customer’s cappuccino. Anthropology majors contemplate the tribal behavior of the youngsters who shop at the Zara where they peddle skinny jeans.

I single out philosophy and anthropology because those are two fields — along with zoology, art history and humanities — whose majors are least likely to find jobs reflective of their education level, according to government projections quoted by the Associated Press. But how many college students are fully aware of that? How many reroute themselves into, say, teaching, accounting, nursing or computer science, where degree-relevant jobs are easier to find? Not nearly enough, judging from the angry, dispossessed troops of Occupy Wall Street.

The thing is, today's graduates aren't just entering an especially brutal economy. They're entering it in many cases with the wrong portfolios. To wit: as a country we routinely grant special visas to highly educated workers from countries like China and India. They possess scientific and technical skills that American companies need but that not enough American students are acquiring.

"That's why there are all these kinds of initiatives to make math and science fun," Stephen J. Rose, a senior economist at Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, reminded me last week. He was referring to elementary and high school attempts to prime more American students for college majors in those areas and for sectors of the job market where positions are more plentiful and lucrative. The center issued a report last year that noted that "not all bachelor's degrees are the same" and that "while going to college is undoubtedly a wise decision, what you take while you're there matters a lot, too."

A wider world of competition now confronts college graduates. A front-page article in The Wall Street Journal last week cited data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to note: "Thirty years ago, the U.S. led the world in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with the equivalent of at least a two-year degree; only Canada and Israel were close. As of 2009, the U.S. lagged behind 14 other developed countries."

That situation isn't helped by the cost of higher education, which has escalated wildly over the last three decades and has left too many students with crippling Everests of debt. In light of the daunting financial calculus of college today, Senator Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, recently introduced a bill that would prod the federal government to disseminate statistics about the graduation rates, incomes, debt levels and such for people who pursue different courses of study at different schools.

"The focus has always been on access," Wyden told me. "Just get to college. Find a way in the door." But today, he said, students facing "an incredibly tough job market" need to know "how their particular program will stack up and what kind of debt they're going to rack up." I'd go even further than he does and call for government and university incentives to steer students into the fields of studies that will serve them and society best. We use taxes to influence behavior. Why not student aid?

That you can't gain a competitive edge with just any diploma from just any college is reflected in the ferociousness of the race to get into elite universities. It's madness out there. Tiger mothers and $125-an-hour tutors proliferate, and parents scrimp and struggle to pay up to $40,000 a year in tuition to private secondary schools that then put them on the spot for supplemental donations, lest the soccer field turn brown and the Latin club languish. The two Americas are evident in education as perhaps nowhere else.

Trying to keep higher learning as affordable as possible is a crucial effort to collapse that divide. No good can come from letting college — as a goal, as an option — slip away. But as a guarantor of a certain quality of life, it already has. And we need to look at a whole lot more than loan rates to fix the problem.

Grading scandal: Compton college teachers accused of giving good grades in exchange for money

Wednesday, May 02, 2012

Carlos Granda

COMPTON, Calif. (KABC) -- An investigation by a California reporting group found that three professors at El Camino College Compton Center were paid to give high grades to three international students in 2010.

According to California Watch, the three professors "awarded" grades to the international students who didn't even attend classes. An investigator working for the school said three students admitted paying for grades - the more money, the better the grade.

Keith Curry, the college's interim CEO, said the instructors were immediately removed from the school. Documents in the investigation said, "The falsification of student's attendance records jeopardizes the District's ability to enroll foreign students, as well as its efforts to regain accreditation."

Investigators were referring to a document that shows the teachers marked students as present in every class, but the students were not actually there, and their grades showed they passed. One person even received an A. The students reportedly then went to California State University, San Bernardino, but were unable to pass placement exams. That's when the alleged scheme started to unravel.

"They looked at students' test grades and wondered how did this happen and that's when they were able to call us and say, 'I think there is a problem,'" said Curry.

The school tried to fire the teachers and spent thousands of dollars in legal fees. But in the end, the teachers were able to resign. Last year, many of the students either changed their stories or hired attorneys and stopped cooperating. The school decided to settle. It took two years and cost $600,000.

"We weren't able to prove that students were paying for grades," said Curry. "We were able to prove that students were not attending classes...and were receiving grades."

The teachers named in the case were Herkie Lee Williams, who resigned in December 2010; Mohammed Boroujerdi, who resigned in September 2011 and was paid a settlement of $26,000; and Mohammed Ghafelebashi, who also resigned in September 2011 and was paid a settlement of $34,000.

Eyewitness News tried getting a response from the professors, but messages were not returned. California Watch contacted Williams, who now lives in Las Vegas. He denied the allegations, saying, "I just have one word: not true...I said, 'Well, I can't allow my reputation to go down the drain, so I had an opportunity to resign.'"

The students were suspended and the school is going through the process to change their grades. The school was known as Compton Community College when it lost its accreditation in 2006 after reports of corruption and financial mismanagement. Now, it's trying to get back on track.

"We want students to know that when they come to the El Camino College Compton Center, they will receive a quality education," said Curry.

Unions falter in fighting benefit cuts

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By Dale Kasler
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Pushed to the margins of the U.S. economy, labor unions like the one representing Northern California's grocery workers are engaged in an epic struggle to preserve their members' wages and benefits.

For the most part, they're losing.

Union members across America still enjoy higher pay on average than their nonunion counterparts, but the gap is shrinking. Organized labor is under persistent pressure to make concessions. Diminishing membership also has eroded union power.

The United Auto Workers gave ailing Detroit automakers $1 billion in cuts. Pilots at American Airlines learned last month their pay and benefits could get reduced substantially. Even California's powerful public employee unions have given ground in recent years.

And in the biggest labor battle the Sacramento region has seen in years, Northern California's three union supermarket chains – Raley's, Safeway and Save Mart – are pushing for concessions on health care and other issues, arguing they need to cut labor costs to compete against Wal-Mart and other nonunion stores.

The situation neared the boiling point this week with Raley's. The West Sacramento grocer ended negotiations and vowed to submit its "last, best and final contract offer" to the United Food and Commercial Workers. That could lead to a strike.

Raley's backed off somewhat Thursday, saying it wants both sides to meet with a federal mediator. "I want to make sure we take the extra effort to give negotiations one last chance," said Chief Executive Michael Teel.

The UFCW wouldn't commit right away to mediation, saying it hadn't heard directly from Raley's. Jacques Loveall, president of Local 8 in Roseville, said Raley's decision "is a reflection of the solidarity our members are demonstrating."

In reality, both sides are vulnerable, and both have reason to fear a confrontation, said Ken Jacobs, chairman of the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

Raley's is already struggling, and "a strike could be devastating," Jacobs said.

Neither can the union afford "to push Raley's off a cliff" by striking, Jacobs said, since that could ultimately cost workers their jobs.

"It has an impact on how much the union can achieve," Jacobs said.

Few unions are immune to the pressure to accept concessions, particularly in a difficult economy. That's true even for public employees, a remaining stronghold for union membership. More than half of all union members in America are now government workers.

California's public employees, who have considerable influence over Democratic elected officials, have escaped wholesale benefit cuts sought by Republicans. But they have compromised on issues such as overtime pay, employee contributions to pensions and paid holidays. And their ranks have been thinned, especially at the local level, by layoffs.

Concessions have been steeper in the private sector, where competition is fierce, firms are struggling and nonunion alternatives abound.

For instance, the UAW in 2009 suspended dental care, agreed to cutbacks in drug coverage and made other concessions to help keep U.S. automakers from going under. The concessions, totaling $1 billion, were made as part of the federal bailout of the industry.

Even in a growing field such as telecommunications, cost pressures can be relentless. Verizon workers went on strike last summer rather than swallow $1 billion in concessions. They went back to work after two weeks even though the contract remains unsettled.

It becomes hard for unions to protect wages in "industries that have alternatives, where you have companies with lower prices," said David Smith, a labor economist at Pepperdine University."Markets are just becoming more and more competitive."

Smith said union workers make about 15 percent more, on average, than nonunion counterparts in the same occupations. The gap is considerably higher in some industries, like construction, according to federal data.

In Northern California's union supermarkets, top pay is around $21 an hour plus benefits. The UFCW says Wal-Mart, the leading nonunion chain, pays half as well.

Yet, as the nonunion share of the grocery business has grown, the middle-class status of grocery workers who do belong to unions also has begun to erode. Workers hired after 2004 must work nearly four times as long as veteran employees to reach the top scale. All workers, particularly the new hires, pay considerably higher health care deductibles than before.

The result has been higher turnover, with fewer employees making a career of grocery work, according to a 2007 study co-authored by Jacobs.

"More of the jobs are part time, the workforce is getting younger," the Berkeley expert said. "A smaller percentage of workers have stayed the years you need to get to the higher pay and see it through to retirement."

With the grocery chains pressing for additional cutbacks, the union says it's trying to be sensitive to the companies' financial pressures. The UFCW also has mounted a public-relations campaign to persuade consumers to shop only at union stores.

Getting that message to resonate with the public can be difficult. Just 11.8 percent of America's workforce belonged to a union in 2001, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, down from 20 percent in 1983.

The slide reflects the nation's changing industrial landscape. Smith said the decline of American manufacturing has robbed the union movement of some of its most reliable workplaces.

Unions have made some gains. The Justice for Janitors movement, launched in the 1980s by the Service Employers International Union, has obtained contracts for thousands of janitors across the country.

The campaign had its big breakthrough in Sacramento in 1999 and now represents 1,200 janitors in the city.

But economic pressures remain: The contract with Sacramento's janitors expired Monday, and employers are pushing to scale back health care coverage, said SEIU spokeswoman Cecille Isidro.

One California union appears comparatively bulletproof: the California Nurses Association. Its members average nearly $90,000 in annual pay. It has the power to disrupt hospital operations by staging one-day strikes, as it did Tuesday at seven Bay Area hospitals operated by Sutter Health.

Smith said it's little wonder the nurses have so much clout.

"It's a highly specialized position," the Pepperdine economist said. "They go into that negotiation from a position of strength."

School districts on edge of insolvency hit record high

By Kimberly Beltran
Wednesday, May 09, 2012

The number of California school districts at risk of failing to meet their near-term financial obligations has reached an all-time high and is likely to increase between now and June, the state's watchdog on school finance reported Tuesday.

Of 967 districts required to file semiannual reports on their financial status, 172 have classified themselves as having a "qualified" certification – meaning they may not meet their financial obligations this year or next two fiscal years, said Joel Montero, CEO of the Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team, in testimony before the Assembly's budget subcommittee on school finance.

According to Montero, nine districts classified as having a "negative" certification and are at risk of insolvency because, based on current conditions, they won't be able to meet financial commitments for the rest of this year or next.

"These are districts in jeopardy of running out of cash, meaning they wouldn't be able to make payroll at some point," Montero said.

The report comes as the state continues to struggle financially. This year, California faces a $9.2 billion budget deficit that, according to recent revenue projections, could grow by as much as $3 billion.

School district budgets, already feeling the sting of several years' worth of funding reductions, also could be hit with additional mid-year cuts totaling $4.8 billion if voters reject a November tax initiative designed to restore some of their lost funding.

Montero's report comes about a month before the official state release of school budget certifications, and the numbers of districts listed as qualified and negative are likely to increase, he said, because his figures are based on districts' self-reviews of their own budgets.

The official "second interim" report from the California Department of Education, expected around June 1, is based on review and determination by county offices of education, charged with fiscal oversight of the districts within their jurisdiction.

The first interim report, released in late February, showed 840 districts with a positive certification, 120 deemed qualified and seven listed as negative.

While the number of districts with a negative certification was up by two over the February report, that figure is actually the lowest it has been since the 2007-08 school year.

But the 171 districts self-certifying as qualified represents a significant jump in that category, surpassing the previous high of 160 in the second half of the 2009-10 school year.

FCMAT works with county offices to help stabilize the finances of districts struggling to meet their obligations, whether it is by improving management practices, business policies and procedures or organizational structure.

The goal is to help districts avoid having to take out an emergency state loan, which also triggers a state takeover of the district administration.

“The elephant in the room for school districts is what happens in November and how do they both budget and plan for that eventuality,” Montero said.

Back of the Line
Law may contribute to advising overload at California's community colleges
Inside Higher Ed

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By Paul Fain

Lines at San Diego Miramar College's academic counseling center are often 25 students long, with wait times stretching to two hours or more. On busy days, the center begins turning students away at 3 p.m., three hours before closing time.

The counseling crush at Miramar has gotten worse because of California's deep budget cuts, which have led to a hiring freeze and reduced hours at the center. Students aren't the only ones who are frustrated; counselors worry about making mistakes in five-minute meetings with students, while employees at the front desk are "taking a lot of abuse," according to two counselors.

Academic counseling is particularly important for community college students, who often lack college-savvy family support. And experts say better counseling is key to the success of the "completion agenda" – the Obama administration and foundation-led push for more college graduates.

But getting more than 10 minutes of one-on-one time with an academic adviser is almost impossible at Miramar. The college is part of the San Diego Community College District, which has 1,700 students per counselor, according to district officials. Other California community colleges are similarly overwhelmed. Pasadena City College has one counselor for every 1,647 students, said Cynthia D. Olivo, associate dean for counseling and student success services at the college. Pasadena had to turn away 2,500 students who sought counseling over a recent six-month period.

While California may be the worst off, the shortage of academic counselors at community colleges is a national problem, observers said, with ratios at many institutions exceeding 1,000 students per counselor. With a boost from the completion agenda, some colleges are trying to hire more help. The City Colleges of Chicago, for example, have made headway toward a goal of having 450 students per counselor by the end of the year, down from 920 in 2010.

There are ways colleges can attempt to get by with high student-to-counselor ratios. Some tout the promise of online advising tools, like Hobson's AgileGrad or CollegeFish.org, a service from Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society for community college students. Online advising can be a good supplement to in-person counseling services, and can reduce caseloads by helping students map out their paths to degrees.

California's counseling shortage, however, is severe enough that only more advisers can fix it, most people agree. But state policies may make that difficult.

Standing in the way is the so-called "50 percent law," a regulation that requires community colleges to spend half of their educational budgets on instructor compensation. When budgets are tight, which is certainly the case now, it's nearly impossible to add counselors without adding faculty members to keep that 50/50 spending split intact, according to some community college leaders and higher education experts.

The law is a "disincentive" to hire counselors or otherwise improve student services, said Lynn Neault, vice chancellor of student services at the San Diego Community College District. As a result, the district has struggled to keep pace with demand, thanks to $300 million in budget cuts over the last three years. And "confounding" state rules like the 50 percent law aren't helping, she said.

The district's chancellor, Constance M. Carroll, has proposed legislative challenges to the law, but none of them have gone anywhere. Recently some college leaders have suggested that counseling salaries should be exempt from the requirement -- either being left out of the equation or being added to the faculty compensation portion of budgets.

"I believe that counselors are on the wrong side of the 50 percent rule," Olivo said in an e-mail, adding that by moving them to the faculty side, community colleges could better make the case for "growth positions to meet student need."

Open to a Solution

Faculty groups and unions have fought to keep the law on the books. But the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges is not opposed to re-examining it, said Michelle Pilati, the group's president and a professor of psychology at Rio Hondo College.

"We don't want it to be a disincentive to hiring counselors or librarians," she said. To date, however, nobody has put forward a good idea for fixing the policy, according to the group, at least a solution that is worth overturning a law that seeks to hold the line on preserving faculty jobs.

"We're willing to look at the 50 percent rule," Pilati said. "But we do believe it serves a purpose."

Some faculty members and outside observers also note that community college budgets are complex, and involve choices beyond just hiring faculty to add counselors. There may be other budget areas that can be adjusted to incrementally bulk up vital student services, according to this argument.

But Carroll said the district's three colleges have been cut nearly to the bone, removing virtually all budgetary wiggle room. And faculty members are more interested in protecting their positions than finding a fix to the 50 percent law, she said.

"I've proposed many times to simply add counseling to the faculty side," said Carroll.

Five-Minute Appointments

Pasadena City College has gotten creative to try to meet student demand for counseling and advising, earning praise for their efforts from Thomas Brock, director of the young adults and postsecondary education policy area for MDRC, a research organization.

For example, the college now offers group counseling sessions for new students and those on academic probation, Olivo said. They also began online counseling, which 3,000 students use per year. Students can request an online review of their academic record to ensure that they're on track for graduation.

"We are trying to do as much as possible so that students are not required to physically present themselves in the counseling department," said Olivo.

Substantial in-person advising is preferable, experts said, particularly for students who are hesitant about seeking help and tend to be the most at risk. This is particularly true at the beginning of semesters, Brock said. Without being able to meet with counselors, students aren't "getting the kind of individual attention and feedback" they need.

"It would be great if we had the resources for every student to sit down with an adviser," said Andy Dryden, a former engineering professor and student adviser at Oregon's Mt. Hood Community College. But that isn't the reality at many community colleges.

Dryden often advised up to 150 students at a time at Mt. Hood, on top of his teaching load. He created AgileGrad to help colleges extend their advising reach. Students can design their academic study plan with the 24/7 service, which includes a chat function and is generally cheaper for colleges than hiring a single counselor. Among other tools, the service can help students avoid overbooked courses or the "$300 mistake" of taking an unnecessary course.

Pasadena City College this summer plans to enlist the help of faculty members in counseling. That effort will be an experiment, Olivo said, because faculty members tend to have narrower areas of expertise than do full-time counselors, who have knowledge that extends across the college's academic programs.

To bring in more counselors, the Campaign for College Opportunity, a California-based nonprofit, recommends the broader use of "paraprofessional" advisers who do not hold advanced degrees. This group could do more of the routine, bureaucratic advising, leaving counselors with master's degrees to focus on "the critical services they are trained to provide."

California's community colleges have recently begun giving priority to students who stay on the path toward a degree, through incentives like an earlier shot at registering for high-demand courses. A state task force has pushed that philosophical shift, which has been controversial in a system that has long prided itself on open access for its 2.6 million students. But the advising overload has made it harder for some students to navigate community college, counselors said, particularly when they first arrive on campus.

The beginning of a semester is a busy time at Miramar. "We're trying to triage the students to get them ready," said David Navarro, a counselor at Miramar. That's not easy when a counselor typically has 5-10 minutes with each student. The ideal is a full hour, he said, with several follow-up visits. The short appointments are stressful for counselors.

"It's very easy to make a mistake," Navarro said. And the stakes are higher for students in the bare-bones version of advising. "Now they're lost."

College summer school in California largely a thing of the past

By Carla Rivera, Los Angeles Times

May 28, 2012

Community college students are especially hard hit as many campuses virtually eliminate summer classes because of budget cuts, affecting the students' plans.

Johnnica Hababag planned to take two classes this summer so she could transfer from Los Angeles Valley College to a four-year school. But those plans were upended when she learned that the community college had all but canceled its summer session because of budget cuts.

Hababag, an anthropology major, now will have to return to the two-year school in the fall.

"This is definitely going to delay my goals," said Hababag, 21. "For me, living in the Valley, it's hard to get to other campuses, and even if I could, they're not offering the classes I need either."

She is one of thousands of students up and down the state shut out of classes this summer as funding cuts force many of California's public colleges to cancel or severely reduce offerings.

Summer school has traditionally provided an outlet for students to help speed progress toward a degree or to transfer — or just to stay on track. But budget reductions this year have forced many public colleges to shift priorities, and many have chosen to slash summer classes to preserve more fall and spring programs.

In the 23-campus California State University system, summer enrollment fell from 75,000 in 2009 to about 12,000 in 2010. The number increased to about 20,000 last year only because campuses on the year-round quarter system offered more courses.

But the number is not expected to rise because most Cal State campuses now require students to foot the entire bill for the classes, rather than using state funds to subsidize a portion of the costs as they do during the regular academic year.

The University of California has been less affected because the 10-campus system has used state funds to increase summer enrollment in previous years, officials said. In 2011, nearly 78,000 students participated in summer instruction, but that number is expected to level off because campuses have fewer resources.

Community colleges have been especially hard hit.

In an informal survey of about half of the state's 112 community colleges, conducted by the chancellor's office, more than a third reported reduced offerings this summer and eight campuses planned no summer sessions at all. Overall, enrollment and course offerings have plummeted and are at their lowest level in 15 years. From 2008 to 2011, the number of students served fell nearly 43%.

Santa Monica College found in a recent study that 15 Los Angeles-area community colleges this summer are offering only a third of the courses they offered in 2008, equivalent to a loss of 6,000 teaching assignments and 168,000 classroom seats.

"The state cuts are in the range of 13%, so where does that come from?" asked Don Girard, director of government relations at the popular school. "Summer and winter session are the areas the elected board has the most authority over."

Santa Monica College is offering about 745 credit and non-credit classes, about the same as last year. Tuition from a large population of international and out-of-state students helps to fund the program, Girard said.

The problem is especially acute in the huge Los Angeles Community College District, where only one of the nine campuses, East Los Angeles College, is offering a full slate of courses — about 330, which is a 30% reduction from the previous year, said Richard Moyer, vice president of academic affairs.

A controversial new policy this year gives priority registration to continuing East L.A. students, leaving those at other campuses in the district with fewer options, Moyer said. About 15,000 students are expected to enroll, and the school could easily have doubled that number if it had the resources, Moyer said.

Although Pierce College and Los Angeles Trade Tech are offering a couple dozen credit courses, Los Angeles Harbor College is typical of others in the district, offering only a smattering of specialized or non-credit courses mostly funded by grants. Harbor student Devin Green managed to find a biology class he needs at El Camino College, which is outside the Los Angeles district. Green, 21, was lucky to get the course and managed to do so only because he has been attending both campuses and was able to register early.

Another Harbor student, Andrew Mestman, said he had unsuccessfully tried to enroll in summer classes for several years and has given up this time. He said he needs one math class to complete requirements to transfer to a four-year institution.

"At Compton College last year, there were 60 people in class and 15 more on a waiting list, so what's the point?" said Mestman, 20. "It's like gambling every summer."

It's not just students who are frustrated. Ken Sherwood, a public speaking instructor at Los Angeles City College, said this will be the third year in a row he hasn't taught a summer course, after 20 years of never missing such assignments. And because he's a full-time employee and can't apply for unemployment, his income will take a hit.

In previous years he might have been able to pick up a class in another district, but cutbacks have eliminated that option this year. He's unsure what he's going to do.

"It's not like I can walk into a McDonald's and say I need a job for two months, that's not practical," said Sherwood.

Cutbacks in summer programs have exacerbated the difficulty students have in completing course work in two years, drawing out community college to a three-, four- or even five-year undertaking, said A. Susan Carleo, president of Los Angeles Valley College. The school this summer is offering only a few specialized nursing and other classes. The campus budget will be reduced by about 20% next year, from $54 million to $44 million, and hundreds of classes have been cut.

"This is our reason for being, so it's especially frustrating and painful to see this happen as a direct result of not having adequate state funding," Carleo said.

But although most colleges are feeling the pain of the higher education cutbacks, not all are in the same situation. The College of the Siskiyous in the Northern California town of Weed is expanding its summer offerings from about 20 classes last year to 120 this year, including about 30 online courses. The tiny, rural college with 1,000 students and 43 full-time faculty is under-enrolled and looking for students, said Robert Frost, vice president of student learning.

Although state education codes forbid direct recruiting of students from other districts, word of mouth has spread as far south as Los Angeles. He said he expects full capacity in most classes, adding that many will probably come from outside the district.

"We have capacity that most urban colleges don't have," Frost said, "so we welcome the students."

California schools rev up bond drives

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Year after year of state budget cuts have pushed school districts throughout California – and several locally – to ask voters to approve new revenue streams in the form of bond measures for building repairs and new technology.

The districts seem to want the same things – roofs that don't leak, efficient heating and air conditioning systems and infrastructure that supports computers in classrooms, among other things.

Statewide, school districts are asking voters to approve $2.67 billion in bonds in the June 5 election, said David Kline of the California Taxpayers Association.

Locally, only a $9 million bond in the Pollock Pines Elementary School District will be on the June ballot, but other districts throughout the Sacramento region are lining up to secure voter approval for bond measures in November.

San Juan Unified is considering a $350 million general obligation bond. Washington Unified in West Sacramento may go for a $30 million bond, while Folsom Cordova Unified is looking at a bond of about $60 million.

"The bond is important to our ability to prepare students for the future by providing safe learning environments," said Cathy Allen, San Juan's senior director of facilities and planning.

But districts that choose to go for a bond in the fall may be facing an uphill battle. Not only will they be in competition with two statewide tax initiatives to fund education, but residents in the city of Sacramento also may be voting on a sales tax hike.

"At some point, the voters might be overwhelmed by the sheer number of taxes that they are seeing on the ballot," Kline said.

Superintendent Kevin Monsma of Pollock Pines said his district targeted next month's ballot for that very reason. "June was an opportunity," he said. "We were concerned about overwhelming the voter. You get so many initiatives that sometimes they say, 'I will vote no on everything.' "

Washington Unified Superintendent Dayton Gilleland said he isn't worried about passing a bond measure in the fall. "We anticipate that the presidential election in November will play in our favor," he said.

His district – like Sacramento City Unified and Folsom Cordova Unified – has not made its bond proposals official with the voters. The districts have until July 17 to file the necessary paperwork to get bond measures on the November ballot.

School bond measures have shown varying degrees of success at the ballot box in recent years. Statewide, about 26 percent of 95 school bond measures introduced between 2009 and 2011 failed, a website run by municipal finance expert Michael Coleman shows.

Sacramento-area voters rejected six of the last 10 bonds on election ballots.

The districts must convince voters of the merits of the bonds, which are paid for by adding fees on property taxes. The maximum allowed per bond is $60 per $100,000 of equity for unified school districts, and $30 for elementary or high school districts.

Washington Unified paid a consultant $29,000 to find out that its residents favored a general obligation bond over a parcel tax, because a bond requires oversight by a committee. Pollock Pines residents also were swayed by the oversight required with a general obligation bond.

"At least they can see the results of where their money is going," said Rhonda Crawford, chief financial officer for Folsom Cordova Unified.

But officials at the California Taxpayers Association said that oversight committees are overrated. "We have anecdotal information that the committees aren't very effective," Kline said. "Sometimes they have trouble finding people to serve."

Davis is the only community in the Sacramento region to pass a parcel tax – passing four in five years, including one in March.

Parcel taxes are harder to pass because they require 66.7 percent voter approval versus the 55 percent for general obligation bonds. Parcel taxes, unlike bond measures, don't restrict funding to facilities.

School officials have learned that support for a bond wanes as the amount rises, so most are opting for smaller bonds that don't meet all their needs.

A poll commissioned by the San Juan Unified poll showed a "high level of support for a bond in the amount of $350 million," according to district officials.

The district has been successful with a bond of that amount before, passing Measure J in 2002 to upgrade facilities at schools. In 1998 voters approved Measure S, a $157 million bond, to replace outdated wiring at schools.

Folsom Cordova Unified officials want to pass a bond to finish the work of Measure N – a $125 million bond passed in 2006 to upgrade schools in Rancho Cordova. As the recession shrank home values, it also reduced the amount the district has been able to collect from the bond, said Matt Washburn, director of facilities.

Local districts officials are trying to rally support for the proposed bonds at community meetings and forums. In Pollock Pines, volunteers will call voters on June 5 to remind them to vote.

"If they said, 'I can't get there,' we will say, 'Hey, we'll drive you,' " Monsma said.