Community colleges suffer as economy improves

Kentucky’s improving economy is driving sharp declines in community college enrollment, leading to staff reductions, budget cuts and, in Louisville, fears it may slow efforts to raise educational attainment.

Statewide, enrollment is expected to fall to about 81,000 this fall — a 25 percent reduction from its peak of 108,301 in 2011, according to system officials. Jefferson Community and Technical College declined to project fall enrollment because it's not final, but said its numbers fell from 15,259 in 2010 to 13,667 last year.

So far that has forced the state system to slash $36 million in expenses this year, including cutting 262 teachers and staff member positions and reducing programs and offerings, said KCTCS President Jay Box. Some of the biggest enrollment declines have been seen in Eastern Kentucky, he said.

Jefferson County Community and Technical College has cut more than $6 million in the last two years, and has had to reduce course offerings, increase reliance on part-time faculty and ask instructors to “do more with less,” such as staffing learning labs in addition to teaching, said spokeswoman Lisa Brosky.

It's a sign of the times that doesn't come as a surprise to college officials.

After flocking to community colleges to earn degrees and new skills during a recession produced unemployment rates as high as 10.9 percent in Kentucky, students are increasingly being lured away amid jobless rates that in July dipped to 5.2 percent.

Earlier this year, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that the two-year public institutions had lost 415,000 students since the spring of 2013.

“Community colleges historically track with the economy,” said Mary Gwen Wheeler, executive director of the 55,000 degrees education initiative. And while more jobs is a good thing, the enrollment declines it creates at two-year colleges are a “big concern” for the civic push to increase Louisville’s college-educated workforce.

The effect is even spilling over to the University of Louisville, which accepts many transfers from JCTC, said admissions director Jenny Sawyer. Although four-year colleges tend to be more insulated from economic ups and downs, fewer transfer students have contributed to a freshman class that declined in size compared to last year, she said.

Marcia Roth, who heads the KCTCS Board of Regents, said the reductions in tuition revenue is particularly difficult on community college budgets after years of cuts in state funding. State appropriations make up just 21 percent of the system's budget. In March, the board decided not to raise tuition, as it had in previous years, to keep student costs down.

Box said while the trend is happening nationally, “the big difference is that legislatures in surrounding states have started reinvesting in higher education” allowing them to better “weather these drops in enrollment.”

“There really needs to be a serious discussion with the next governor and General Assembly this spring about whether we’re going to reinvest in higher education because this is getting critical,” Box said.

Wheeler, whose group’s goal is to increase Louisville’s college-educated workforce to 50 percent by 2020 from 41.5 percent today, said her group will be targeting ways to increase attainment by increasing retention, or the percentage of two-year students who finish what they began and earn a degree. Right now, only 17 percent finish a degree where they started, she said.

Box said the system is looking at similar initiatives, and noted the improved economy does have “silver linings” for community colleges, including increases in demand for workforce training in partnership with businesses.

“We've tightened our belts,” he said, “but if this trend continues, we are going to be in trouble in the future.”

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