

Transcript

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BOB EDWARDS, host:

More than half of the country's college students are enrolled at community colleges, but as states cope with budget shortfalls, they're cutting support to these schools at a time when a swelling population and a tight job market are pushing enrollments to record levels. NPR's Anthony Brooks reports.

ANTHONY BROOKS reporting:

Inside the brand-new medical building of Northern Virginia Community College, the shiny linoleum floors and white walls look as clean as the freshly fallen snow outside the huge glass windows.

Group of Students: One, two, three.

SOUNDBITE OF APPLAUSE

BROOKS: On a recent morning, the new medical research library officially opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. This campus, outside of Washington, DC, opened last summer to provide training programs in various medical jobs. Graduates will leave here as physical therapists, EMTs and dental hygienists. Thirty-two-year-old Sherrie Howard(ph), who struggled through high school and spent years working in low-paying jobs, will be a nurse.

Ms. SHERRIE HOWARD (Community College Student): I'm the first person in my family to actually graduate. And I really appreciate community college because it gives people an opportunity to see that, hey, they can succeed, even if it takes them a little bit more time, so I really appreciate that.

BROOKS: Howard is virtually guaranteed a job when she graduates because there's an acute shortage of nurses. So are these students who are training to become physical therapists with Assistant Professor Christine Sealy(ph).

Assistant Professor CHRISTINE SEALY (Northern Virginia Community College): Right now there is not enough physical therapist assistants or physical therapists in this immediate area. We have 100 percent job placement for those who want it upon graduation.

BROOKS: But despite such hopeful prospects, the college president, Robert Templin, is concerned. As he tours his new classrooms and labs, he points out many are empty, locked and dark.

Mr. ROBERT TEMPLIN (Northern Virginia Community College President): Six of them with about 40 chairs each. And out of the six, only one is being used, not because we don't have students. We don't have any teachers.

BROOKS: That's because Northern Virginia Community College doesn't have enough money to pay them. In the last decade, the population of this part of Virginia has grown by 25 percent, largely due to an influx of immigrants. At the same time, the state Legislature, faced with a budget squeeze, has cut aid to this school by 25 percent. Templin says the result is a campus that was designed to serve 4,000 students a year can train only 1,000.

Mr. TEMPLIN: Eighty percent of all enrollment growth in Virginia in the last several years has been at the local community colleges. But community colleges lack the capacity to respond because state legislatures are cutting higher education budgets.

Mr. ANTHONY CARNEVALE (Educational Testing Service): This is a case of very dramatic social failure in the United States.

BROOKS: Anthony Carnevale is an economist with the Educational Testing Service. He says community colleges across the country face similar pressures. Last year, for example, Florida turned away 35,000 students from community college programs because of its budget woes. California turned away 100,000.

Mr. CARNEVALE: The further difficulty is that there are going to be another four million 18- to 24-year-olds coming on line in the United States between now and 2015, so the number of people who are standing outside the college door is growing.

BROOKS: Some help could come from the Bush administration, which is proposing to spend \$250 million next year to help community colleges expand their job-training capacity. Carnevale calls this a good idea backed up by too little money. But Julian Alssid, with the Workforce Strategy Center in New York, says even such a modest sum could help if community colleges use it to operate more efficiently. For example, Alssid says their job-training programs should forge closer links with businesses. And he says within colleges, there should be tighter coordination between job-training programs and academic courses.

Mr. JULIAN ALSSID (Workforce Strategy Center): So if a college has a very well developed, customized business training arm, well, if that is somehow connected up with the academic side of the college, that can almost become like an R&D arm for the college and, thus, enriching academic curriculum. There's no question they're cash-strapped. We still believe they could be functioning more efficiently.

BROOKS: Back at Northern Virginia Community College, President Bob Templin says even such modest federal aid is appreciated. But he also says states, which provide the lion's share of support for community colleges, must renew their commitment to them.

Mr. TEMPLIN: The dynamics that we've got now, everyone walks away a loser. Thousands of students that are qualified to enter programs are denied admission, thousands of jobs that are needed go unfilled. It's an irrational approach to a very severe and significant problem that is going to be with us 20 to 30 years.

BROOKS: Experts in work force development describe community colleges as the nation's most effective job-training system. But if they're to continue to serve that function, they'll have to survive what some call the triple whammy of rising enrollment, higher tuition and shrinking state support. Anthony Brooks, NPR News.

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