

Community Colleges snubbed by Michigan Governor and state legislature

By Charles Bogle
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Legislation passed last fall by the Michigan state legislature—with a unanimous vote in the lower house—and signed into law by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, makes a mockery of claims by the Granholm administration that it seeks to improve community colleges in order to provide greater educational opportunities and better jobs for working people.

Appropriations were cut, and even the funding proposed was conditioned on performance measures and standards that will subordinate the community colleges even more directly to corporate interests. The legislative discussions surrounding the creation and passage of this bill are even more disturbing, for they reveal a contempt for both community colleges and members of the middle and working class who increasingly depend on them for entrance to a better life. Taken together, the appropriations and the attendant discussions offer further proof that Democrats and Republicans are representing the interests of a tiny financial elite at the expense of the wage-earning majority.

Granholm has sought to distance herself from traditional liberalism, following in the footsteps of the Clinton administration in positioning the Democratic Party as the advocate of fiscal responsibility and tight budgets, combined with a modicum of reformist rhetoric, particularly in the sphere of education. But her claims to support education as the vehicle for improving opportunities for the lower-paid sections of the working class are as hollow as those of George Bush, in the now-notorious No Child Left Behind legislation.

The pattern of appropriations for two-year and four-year colleges and universities shows the gulf between rhetoric and reality. In the current fiscal year, while Granholm increased four-year university funding because she reportedly wanted to avoid tuition increases (although they occurred anyway) the governor announced that appropriations for Michigan community colleges will be

reduced by 1.7 percent, and that “tuition restraint” will be imposed on these institutions as well.

The real attitude of the Lansing politicians of both parties was revealed at a Republican caucus held while the terms of the higher education funding legislation, House Bill 4831, were being finalized. Questioned about the disparity between appropriations for four- and two-year institutions, Republican Majority Leader Ken Sikkema replied, referring to the community colleges, “to hell with them.”

Sikkema then went on to say that community colleges, unlike universities, have taxing authority and can ask voters to approve a millage. The majority leader added that “they can’t have both: parity and taxing authority.” With the Michigan economy among the worst of the 50 states, hit by heavy job losses and wage-cutting in the auto sector, and a sharp decline in the state median income since 1999, winning approval of property tax increases in community college districts is nearly impossible.

House Bill 4831 ties funding to performance indicators and standards in a way which clearly disadvantages the two-year schools. Funding for four-year institutions is tied to three performance indicators: the number of FTEs (full-time equivalent students), weighted degrees and commercialization and research investment. On the other hand, the amount of appropriations for community colleges have no less than 11 performance indicators and standards, many of which have undermined their traditional mission of offering a quality higher education for those who might otherwise not be able to afford one.

For example, one performance indicator is the “degree and certificate completion rates,” but anyone familiar with community colleges knows that the majority of transfer students do not receive Associates Degrees before transferring. To meet this requirement, then, community colleges likely will be forced to make it easier

for more students to earn Associates Degrees before transferring; and one way to attain this goal is to weaken course loads and standards. If community colleges cannot or will not weaken the curricula and programs, they will see their funding decrease.

If they wish to continue offering a higher education to working people, they will be forced to sell themselves to private sources of funding. And private sources have a history of pressuring colleges, especially those that are financially strapped, to revise curricula and programs to suit the needs of business instead of the students.

Two other performance indicators may go a long way toward turning community colleges into the corporate-oriented job training centers that President Bush promoted during the 2004 presidential campaign. The first, the “total number of student contact hours [the number of hours during which teachers and students meet] and sub-total of contact hours in high cost programs” will likely favor the more expensive (in terms of facilities and required teaching and learning tools) non-transfer programs such as nursing and the technical fields.

While these fields are certainly an integral part of higher education and meet fundamental societal needs, transfer programs remain the choice of the majority of community college students; and tying state funding to the number of contact hours in non-transfer, high cost programs will most likely result in many community colleges “counseling” incoming students to enter non-transfer, high-cost programs instead of the transfer programs they may have wished to enter and which, in the end, may have better served their future needs.

The “number of individuals participating in employer-sponsored training” is undoubtedly aimed at promoting job training, and just as undoubtedly, community colleges will be forced to grow even fonder of courting corporate sponsors and designing programs to meet their specific needs. But what happens to the working class student who completes the job training program and then sees that the job she has trained for is no longer in existence, or, if it still exists, is no longer paying wages and benefits that will allow her to live a rewarding life? The most likely scenario is to enter yet another job training program and hope for the best.

This overview of House Bill 4831 begs the question: if Governor Granholm and the Michigan state legislature are truly interested in promoting and improving the quality of community colleges, why are they decreasing appropriations, tying these decreased appropriations to

performance indicators and standards that will likely diminish the academic quality of two-year colleges, and openly expressing contempt for these same institutions and, by implication, the working class students they serve?

Given State Senator Sikkema’s boorish “to hell with them” and Governor Granholm’s decision to single out community colleges for funding cuts, elitism is one possible answer. In fact, when interviewed for this article, Dr. Nixon, president of Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Michigan, stated that he asked State Representative Darwin Booher, chairman of the subcommittee on community colleges, “if there was any rationale for the apparent lack of support for community colleges by both the governor of the state and the senate majority leader.” Representative Booher replied, “They both went to Harvard,” implying each looks down his or her nose at community colleges and their working-class students, a class bias that is truly bipartisan.

The implications of the appropriations performance indicators and standards lead to the only logical conclusion: politicians never meant to improve the academic quality of community colleges and thereby offer working class students the same education and opportunities as the wealthier students in more prestigious, four-year universities.

Instead, both Democrats and Republicans, representing the interests of the financial elite, mean to force community colleges to look for funding in the private sphere, and to force more community college students to enter job training programs instead of academic fields. From the viewpoint of the financial elite and their political voices, such an arrangement will mean even more profit-making opportunities; but from the viewpoint of working people, the privatization of community colleges and emphasis on job training will mean fewer educational and career opportunities.

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