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Community College Tuition Policies Reexamined

By Carina Zaragoza

The American Association of Community Colleges met in Philadelphia this week for its annual conference. Among the speakers was bestselling author Amy Tan, who attended San Jose City College. The conference was composed of various presentations on topics ranging from green campuses to increasing enrollment to assisting military personnel with transitioning from active duty back to school.

A major topic was community college tuition. Christopher Mullin, fellow of the College of Education at the University of Florida, demonstrated a shift in tuition policies at various community colleges.

During the 1930s through the 1950s, the tuition rates at four-year institutions and community colleges were relatively similar. It wasn't until the 1980s that tuition at four-year institutions nearly tripled. Though four-year institutions increased their tuition rates substantially, community colleges likewise increased their tuition rates, and gone were the days of free community colleges.

During the presentation Mullin offered up the floor to audience members to share their views on the subject of increased community college tuition. Some stated that state budgets limit funds for community colleges, and costs have to be transferred to students. Others feel merit-based aid, such as scholarships for high achievers, has a place in the community college system. This view was met with some resistance, as one college official asked, "Isn't it in society's interests to educate everybody?"

Within the community college tuition debate are questions about the community college system's role and commitment to students. It has long been accepted that community colleges are open-access institutions, as one audience member pointed out, and linking aid to achievements may deny access to students who do not meet high academic standards. Also, if tuition continues to rise, then low-income students may also be denied access to higher education.

Another audience member, a community college trustee, had this to say regarding the mission of the community college system: "Not everyone needs a bachelor's degree. We need good auto mechanics and carpenters." Though this view may be a bit harsh, the issue was not resolved at the end of the conference and may not be resolved anytime soon.

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