

California College Postpones Plan to Charge Much More for Some Popular Courses

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Following a week of student protests and a request from the chancellor of the California community college system to hold off, Santa Monica College has canceled its plan to offer certain popular courses at higher prices this summer.

At an emergency meeting on Friday, the college's board of trustees voted to indefinitely postpone implementation of the two-tiered payment system, which would have offered 50 of the courses in the highest demand for \$180 per credit hour, in addition to the 700 courses the college already offers for \$36.

Speaking to the board and the assembled students and faculty members, the college president, Chui L. Tsang, recommended that the board postpone the payment plan after hearing the objections of so many students.

"Based on these concerns of our college community," he said, "I feel we need to pause, and take a broader look, and take more time for dialogue."

The two-tiered payment system, which had been set to begin as a pilot program this summer, was designed to help address the difficulty of getting into some of the most popular classes, amid state budget cuts that have forced the college to trim more than 1,000 course offerings in recent years. The higher price of the classes, administrators said, would cover only the cost to the college of offering them.

Many students, however, mobilized in opposition to the two-tiered pricing plan, which they complained would make low-income students into second-class citizens. On Tuesday, hundreds of students protested outside a board of trustees meeting, demanding to be let inside. Campus police officers doused more than two dozen people with pepper spray; several suffered minor injuries.

Mr. Tsang announced Friday that he had set up an independent panel to review the police response to the protest.

The majority of the students at the board meeting on Friday cheered the news that the two-tiered pricing plan would be postponed indefinitely. Still, some remained frustrated that administrators had changed course only after the protest and subsequent news media coverage.

"This should have happened two months ago," said Marjohnny Torres, 22. "If it wouldn't have been for Tuesday night and the students saying something about it, this would not have happened."

Some faculty members and administrators countered that the students did not understand the plan. They said it would have offered some classes at higher prices, in addition to sections of the same courses at regular prices, simply giving students more options and freeing up space in the less expensive sections of popular classes. One teacher at the college told of one student who offered other students \$300 to drop out of a class, so he could get the final credit he needed.

"I have spoken with many students who are eager to enroll in the proposed self-funded classes," said Jennifer Merlic, who teaches chemistry at Santa Monica College. "I hope that they will be able to do so, especially for our winter session."

What options Santa Monica College students will have to get into classes next winter remains unclear. While trustees voted to curtail the two-tiered program for the summer session, they also warned that more state budget cuts were likely, meaning still more cutbacks to course offerings were probable unless they could find creative solutions.

"This is not privatization of education," said Rob Rader, a trustee. "We are trying to create an alternative that is more cost-effective and creates space for everyone."