Community college uses tiered tuition to balance budget

By Jennifer Medina, New York Times

SANTA MONICA – For years now, administrators at the community college here have been inundated with woeful tales from students unable to register for the courses they need. Classes they want for essential job training or to fulfill requirements to transfer to four-year universities fill up within hours. Hundreds of students resort to crying and begging to enroll in a class, lining up at the doors of instructors and academic counselors.

Now, though, Santa Monica College is about to try something novel. This summer it will offer some courses for a higher price, so that students who are eager to get into a particular class can do so if they pay more.

The plan may be the first of its kind in the country, college officials and other higher education experts say, and if the college succeeds in implementing it, many other community colleges are likely to follow. Since 2009, enrollment in California community colleges has fallen by 300,000 students, to 2.6 million, and many believe the difficulty of registering for classes is the most important deterrent.

For generations, community colleges have been seen as a social equalizer, providing a relatively inexpensive education for poor students, immigrants and others without the skills, grades or money to attend a four-year institution.

So the two-tiered tuition structure being proposed here is raising eyebrows, and fundamental questions, about the role and obligations of community colleges. Will the policy essentially block some of the people it is designed to benefit? Many students believe the new policy – if the state

does not block its implementation, which it could yet do – will unfairly exclude the poorest students and create a kind of upper and lower class of students.

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