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## Community colleges filled to capacity

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Emily Doyle wanted to be a doctor.

But with the way life happened, the 21-year-old says she doesn't have the time to go through the many years of education the profession requires. She has chosen to become a nurse instead, and was standing in line this rainy Monday to enroll in courses at Cape Fear Community College.

"I have a baby," she said as she rocked her 14-month-old son, Elijah, in his stroller. "I need a job now."

Lines are getting longer at this community college, and at others across the state and the country. Community colleges are cheaper and offer certifications faster than four-year institutions, which is particularly appealing in this unstable economy, as more people get laid off or are otherwise cash-strapped and rush to learn new skills.

But the spike in enrollment at the nation's community colleges is both a blessing and a curse. At the same time they're getting more students and their quality is more widely recognized, their budgets are suffering, said Scott Ralls, president of the N.C. Community College System.

Over the past year, the state's community colleges, which have 250,000 degree-seeking students, have added 15,200 full-time students, Ralls said. Lack of space is one of the major problems, and it's particularly true for CFCC, the state's fifth-largest community college and one of its fastest-growing, he said.

Many students won't be able to enroll in the courses they need this fall.

During the few weeks early registration has been open, the college has had 5,033 students enroll for the fall semester, 23.5 percent more than the same period last



PHOTO BY MIKE SPENCER  
People wait in line to register for classes at Cape Fear Community College on Monday, July 13, 2009.

year, CFCC spokesman David Hardin said. Spanish classes are already full, and so are most health care programs, including nursing.

"Procrastination for students will be more costly this year than ever before," Ralls said.

CFCC, which has seats for about 8,000 students, has had to turn away 1,000 in years past because all its classes filled up. The school expects to turn away 10 to 15 percent more this year. It will be adding as many seats as its classrooms can possibly take, said Carol Cullum, CFCC's vice president of student development.

With delays in the state construction permitting process, CFCC won't open a new building with classrooms until 2011, Hardin said. This year, it's planning for a budget shortfall of 5 percent, which could mean cutting classes for 400 high school students in dual enrollment, he said.

Brunswick Community College is preparing for a 9 percent budget cut, while 1,034 students have already enrolled for the fall. That's an increase of about 11 percent over the total number who registered early last year, said Sharon Thompson, BCC's vice president for academic services.

BCC is putting as many seats as possible in its classrooms, as well as opening new sections every day and scheduling them outside the most popular hours, Thompson said.

BCC and CFCC are certainly not alone in their juggling.

"Virtually, every state is having some issues because of enrollment growth and budget cuts from the states," said Norma Kent, vice president of communications for the American Association of Community Colleges. California expects to turn away 200,000 students, she said, and the country's largest community college, Florida's Miami Dade, is talking about imposing a cap on enrollment.

Ralls said he hopes community colleges, which get much less federal money than four-year institutions, will receive more support now that President Barack Obama has shown he recognizes their value in this economy and announced intentions to try to improve their situation.

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