



## College crisis is a disaster California can't afford

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In a disaster flick that opened this weekend, supposedly based on prophecies left behind by the Maya, 2012 is the year that California will crash into the Pacific, during a swirl of cataclysmic events that reshapes the world.

Assuming that the Maya or their Hollywood interpreters weren't right and we actually survive 2012, California may face a disaster of its own making within the next 15 years or so, much quieter than the widescreen version but capable of its own form of devastation.

Call it the Education Apocalypse.

By 2014, according to projections by the state Finance Department, there will be 640,000 more college applicants in California than colleges and universities have room to handle.

Colleges are already turning away students. The San Diego Community College District put between 10,000 and 20,000 on waiting lists this year, "and there's no sign that 2011 or 2012 will be much different," said Rich Grosch, president of the district's board.

By 2025, if current trends continue, 41 percent of jobs in California will require college degrees, while only 35 percent of Californians will have graduated from college, translating into a shortage of 1 million college-educated workers, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, or PPI, a think tank in San Francisco.

Although those projections are not quite as dramatic as the silver-screen image of Los Angeles swallowed by earthquakes and tidal waves, the Education Apocalypse could turn out to be a pretty destructive force, potentially demolishing the state's status as a high-tech mecca and eroding the economy.

"Because of our high cost of living, companies find it hard to attract young scientists and engineers to move here, which means we have to grow them here," Pete Garcia, chairman of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp.'s Development Foundation, told a meeting of business and education leaders Friday. "But right now, the numbers we've got coming out of college are dismal."

PPI demographer Hans Johnson said the state faces two choices: “We could have a less-educated work force, meaning it will be harder to draw business here and harder to have new industries springing up. Or we could work together to find ways to improve the education system.”

The effects of having fewer educated workers are far-reaching.

Since college graduates earn nearly twice as much as people without a degree, a less-educated work force translates into less spendable income to fuel the economy and fewer tax dollars to support government services. At the same time, a lack of education could translate into greater demand for social services. High school graduates are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as college graduates.

San Diego defense contractor Terry McKearney, who works on science education issues for the local chapter of the National Defense Industrial Association, said education “has emerged as a cause of concern for us over the past couple years.”

McKearney said that as baby boomers — now in their 50s and 60s — start to leave the work force, there are fewer well-educated younger workers to pick up the slack. He said that though two-thirds of baby boomers have the skills required by most defense jobs, that’s true of only one-third of Generations X and Y.

“At the end of the day, we need to get more young people educated in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) so that baby boomers like me can retire,” he said. The United States is the only industrialized country where younger generations are less educated than their elders.

Right now, the most visible part of California's Education Apocalypse has to do with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget cuts, which have forced colleges to cut courses and raise fees, dissuading students from enrolling or completing the courses.

“This is the worst time to be cutting back, since we're so countercyclical,” Grosch said. “Periods of high unemployment are usually when our enrollments swell.”

But California's education system has been lagging for a while, with challenges that include an unpredictable tax structure that puts schools through boom-and-bust cycles; a higher-than-average proportion of high school dropouts; and a convoluted higher-education system that often makes it hard to transfer from a community college into the California State University or University of California systems.

As a result, California lags much of the rest of the nation in the percentage of students who earn four-year degrees.

Among the 20 most populous states, California ranks 19th in the percentage of high school graduates who enroll directly in a four-year college or university; 18th in the percentage who enroll in any college, including community colleges; and 18th in the ratio of bachelor's degrees awarded to high school graduates, according data collected by the PPI.

Although the state likes to promote its “highly educated work force” as a drawing card to high-tech firms, 44 other states have higher percentages of graduates in the STEM fields, said Jeremy Offenstein, research analyst at the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy in Sacramento.

There are several reasons for the state's laggardly status, ranging from the effects of Proposition 13, which made the revenue stream for education much less reliable than it had been in the past, to the state's relatively large number of immigrants, since a disproportionate number of first-generation immigrants fail to make it out of high school.

In addition, the state's education system lacks coordination. High school graduates often haven't had the right prerequisites for college. And community college graduates often find that their course work is rejected by the Cal State and UC systems.

“There are no clear pathways from one institution to another,” Offenstein said.

Johnson said the state could wipe out half of the 2025 gap between jobs and workers merely by making it easier for community college students to get into universities. He and Offenstein urged the business leaders to push the Legislature into action on the issue.

“We don't have any statewide planning for what we expect our educational institutions to do,” Offenstein said. “Planning's something we need to focus on.”

But that's only half the problem. As should be clear from those long wait lists, colleges also require adequate funding to make sure students get a good education, though that message doesn't seem to be resonating with taxpayers.

A PPI poll this month shows that while 66 percent of Californians believe college is a necessity and 65 percent realize colleges are harder to get into these days, 56 percent say they don't want to pay higher taxes for colleges, 68 percent say students should not be charged with higher fees, and a 47 percent plurality wouldn't support a bond measure.

“People want the services but don't want to pay for them,” Grosch said.

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