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Study: More students will be unable to afford college

By Boris Melnikov
DAILY TROJAN - USC

LOS ANGELES — If higher education affordability were a class, the nation would be flunking.

A report compiled by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a nonprofit institution for higher education research, concluded that many students would not be able to afford higher education in the near future.

"The nation's colleges and universities have become less affordable for students and families compared with a decade ago," wrote the authors of the "Measuring Up 2004" study.

Only two states have seen their higher education systems become more affordable overall since the last study, performed in 2002, while 17 states scored lower on every indicator of affordability.

California is only one of three states to get a passing grade this year. It received a B.

Minnesota and Utah, each scoring a C, were the other states to receive grades better than a D, while 36 states all across the country got failing grades.

Authors of the study could not be reached for comment.

Alisa Cunningham, director of research at the Institute of Higher Education Policy, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., said studies like "Measuring Up" often paint a mixed picture.

"Different approaches show different things," she said. "On one hand, enrollment in colleges is increasing, on the other hand, costs have increased as well."

California's good grade in affordability can be attributed to its generous funding of community colleges, which lowers tuition at those institutions, Cunningham said.

"Because California has traditionally supported its community college system, it's easy for all kinds of students to start out at a local community college" before transferring to a four-year college, she said.

Other states, by contrast, charge higher fees for attending community colleges, but also give more financial aid to those who qualify.

The study found that college education affordability in California had increased over the past decade,

but was lower this year than in 2000.

The percentage of annual income that an average family would pay for a public four-year university in California has decreased from 37 percent a decade ago to 32 percent today.

Private four-year colleges in the state stayed about the same level in terms of affordability. On average, students' families would pay 71 percent of the annual income for college expenses this year, as opposed to 70 percent in 1994.

The amount of the average financial aid package was taken into consideration when expenses were calculated.

California led the nation in 2002 as the state to receive an A in education affordability.

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— Alisa Cunningham
Director of Research at
the Institute of Higher
Education Policy

As part of a plan to balance the state budget, state universities denied admission to 11,400 eligible freshmen who would have entered this fall.

They were instead asked to enroll in community colleges for a couple of years. The students would then transfer to a four-year public university in the University of California or California State University systems before their junior year.

The cost of community colleges has also increased. Students now pay \$26 per unit, a more than two-fold increase of the \$11-per-unit cost last year, even though the rate is still the lowest in the nation.

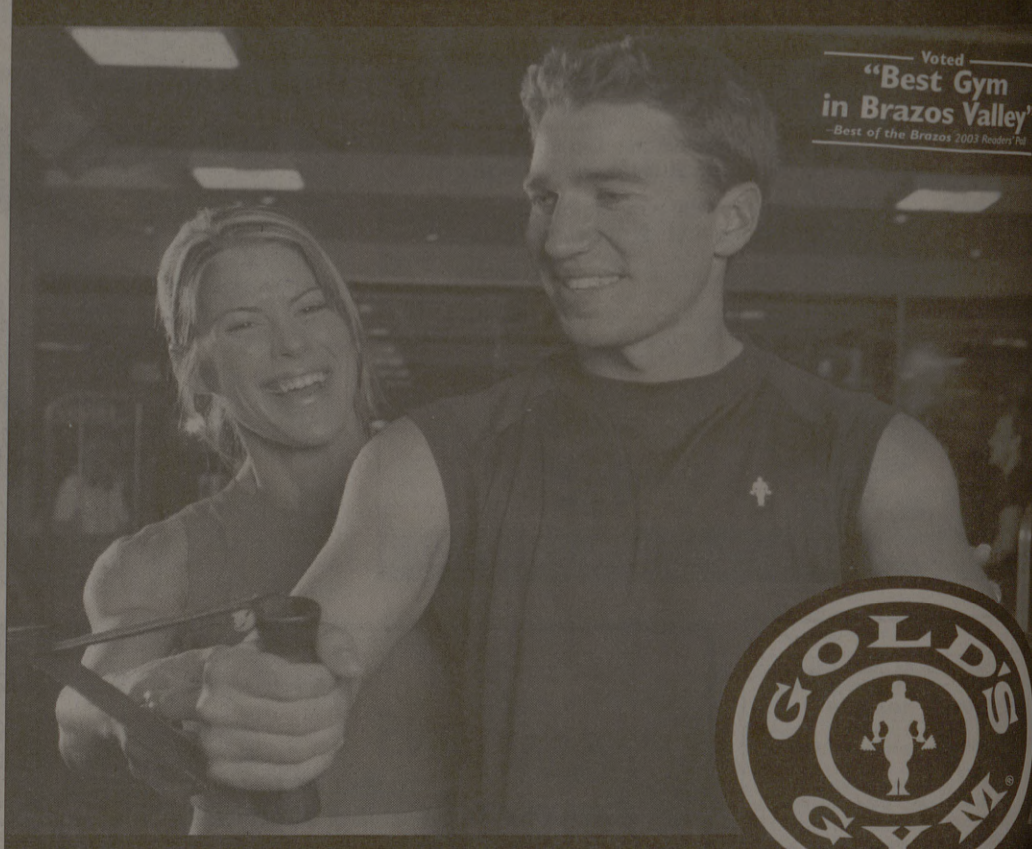
California is not alone in attempting to cut back on higher education. As the majority of states faced declining tax revenue and rising expenses in the past couple of years, higher education funding was often on the chopping block.

The University of Southern California has been dedicated to making sure students and their families can afford to attend the institution, said Dr. Glasgow, acting director of undergraduate programs.

"USC tries its best to meet 100 percent of individually determined financial aid for each student," said. "We try to meet the needs of every student."

The university offers a number of programs to help defray the cost of attendance, including grants, loans and installment plans, Glasgow said. Unique circumstances, such as death in the family, will also be taken into account when calculating individual financial aid packages.

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