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Allhands: Maricopa Community Colleges needs to rethink what it does

[JOANNA ALLHANDS \(//WWW.AZCENTRAL.COM/VIEWPOINTS/JOANNA-ALLHANDS/\)](http://www.azcentral.com/viewpoints/joanna-allhands/)

Joanna Allhands (<http://www.azcentral.com/staff/9911/joanna-allhands/>), The Republic | azcentral.com 7:10 a.m. MST December 15, 2016



A student walks at Mesa Community College Red Mountain campus April 6, 2016. (Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

Anyone who was surprised at a recent proposal to nix a few community-college presidents (/story/news/local/arizona-education/2016/12/09/maricopa-community-colleges-system-consolidate-cut-costs/95008526/) (and maybe additional staff) obviously didn't read the outgoing chancellor's swan song in February.

In an Op-ed penned for The Republic (/story/opinion/op-ed/2016/02/13/maricopa-community-colleges-funding/80062984/), Rufus Glasper set the table for the possible cuts we are now seeing.

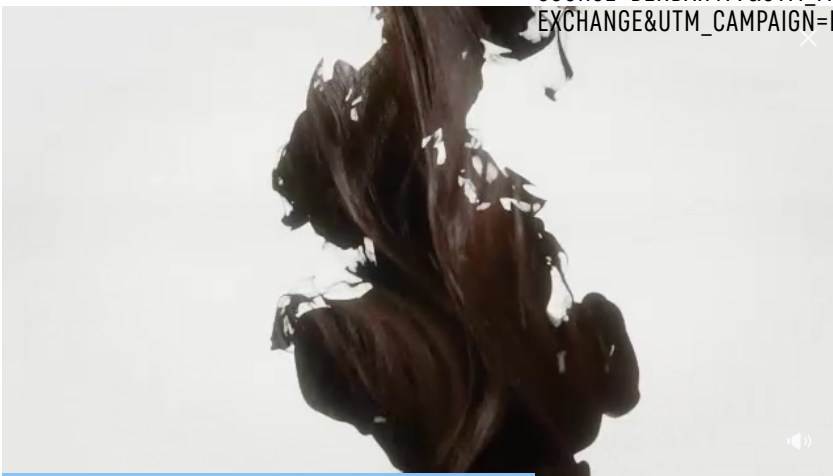
Arizona lawmakers have zeroed out state support for Maricopa Community Colleges, and even though states and cities elsewhere are creating programs to offer free tuition (http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/Community-Colleges-Creating-the-Future.aspx), there's no movement here to do anything of the sort. The district has raised taxes and tuition to help fill the void, but it can only do that so much, particularly among the lower-income students it serves.

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Glasper said in his Op-ed that the system needs to find a long-term funding source. But really what that means is the system has to rethink what it does

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It has no choice, if it wants to survive.

The district's new reality hit quickly

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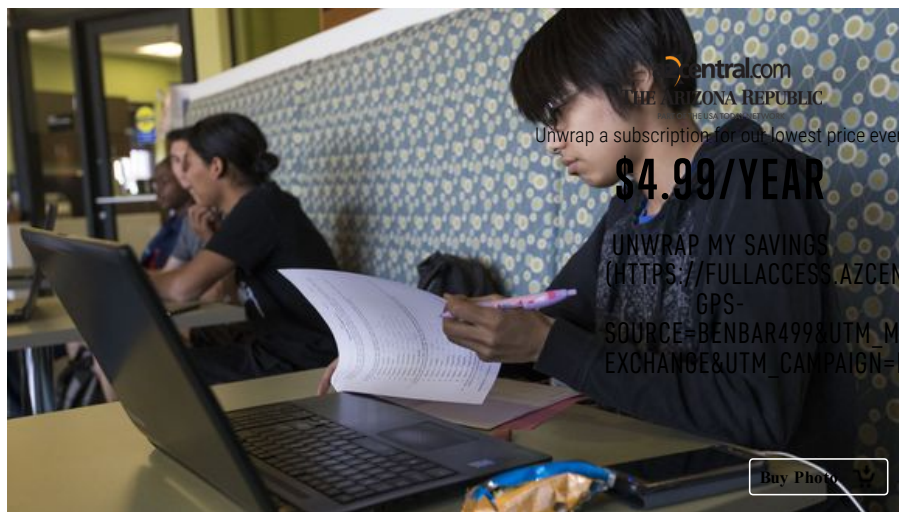
Enter the “transformation,” as district leaders have outlined, but the plan to potentially consolidate leadership and resources is a realization that the higher-education landscape has fundamentally changed, and to continue the status quo won't keep one of the nation's largest community-college systems on track for the long haul.

The district's new reality hit quickly. Enrollment hit a peak in fiscal 2010 (https://www.maricopa.edu/sites/default/files/FY16-17_ADOPTED_BGT.pdf), with 255,200 students, but has been falling steadily since. There were 202,508 students enrolled in fiscal 2015, the most recent year for which data is available.

The drop mirrors a national trend. Community colleges across the country are experiencing lower enrollment and the financial crunches that come with it, even though most of them cost far less to educate students than universities with better financial footings. Some have merged with universities (<https://www.eab.com/daily-briefing/2015/12/04/why-university-mergers-might-be-the-future-for-community-colleges>), while others are scaling back programs and services.

President Obama began raising the red flag in 2010 because the majority of community-college students nationally don't graduate (https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/21stCentReport.pdf) or transfer to a university, and the achievement gaps are even wider for minority students. His administration and Congress began pressuring colleges to better measure and improve their performance.

How does that fit with universities?



(Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic/azc)

A recent study by a national economics firm showed that students attending Maricopa Community Colleges receive \$4.20 for every \$1 (<https://asa.maricopa.edu/departments/institutional-effectiveness/reports/maricopa-economic-impact-study>) they pay for their education, while the state gains \$12.10 in state income and social savings. Attending – and completing – school still pays off, big time.

But while completion rates at the district's 10 schools have historically beat national averages, they continue to hover around 30 percent. That means despite efforts to help first-time college students stay in school, better place students in classes that match their skill levels and smooth the credit-transfer process to universities, 70 percent of students seeking a degree or certificate still never receive one.

There will be a lot of talk in the coming months about changes that need to be made. But before we go too far down that road, perhaps the first order of business should be to define – or, more accurately, redefine – what the system does.

Roles got clouded as state universities began to boost their enrollments, particularly among low-income students. They are bolstering financial aid and investing more in online education, making it easier for working students to take classes.

Where do community colleges fit in that model? Are they a cheaper place for university students to get basic courses out of the way? A place to hone workplace skills? Or to get remedial students up to speed?

In the past Maricopa Community Colleges was all of these things, but as time marches and the need for degrees grows, it may have to choose one – or chart a new course.

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