



## Community colleges deserve state's support

By Albio Sires

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Decades ago, high school graduates who wanted to go on to college chose their schools by name and prestige. But many of these colleges have become prohibitively expensive and exclusive. As a result, many of today's cost-conscious students are looking elsewhere to earn their college degrees.

With increasing frequency, these young men and women are turning to two-year community colleges, where they can get a good education at a convenient location for less money. Community college administrators say enrollment is way up this year, a product of the sour national economy and rising tuition rates at four-year schools, including state universities such as Rutgers. The American Association of Community Colleges reports many schools are reporting double-digit percentage enrollment increases.

In the fiscal 2003 budget process, we increased funding for community colleges by \$5 million for this school year. Giving more money to these schools was the right thing to do. Not only must many community college students pay their own way through college, but these schools are facing increased challenges serving workers displaced through layoffs triggered by the economic downturn. These workers are going back to school to reposition themselves for recession-proof jobs. They are looking to gain skills that will help them succeed in the 21st century.

Aside from the price, these two-year colleges are becoming increasingly attractive because they are developing ways students can stay beyond the two years of course work it takes to receive an

associates degree. Some community colleges participate in a "communiversity" program that utilizes the Internet and other means to allow students to earn a bachelor's degree without transferring.

Maintaining and expanding higher education programs in New Jersey will always be a priority for me. We must keep college affordable and accessible for all who want to go. Our efforts not only hold the promise of successful and productive futures for the students, but they ensure a strong, prosperous future for New Jersey as well.

*Assembly Speaker Albio Sires is a Democrat from Hudson County*