Applications Surge for Courses at CUNY’s 2-Year Colleges

By MARC SANTORA

At Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, located in what the 2000 census found to be the nation’s poorest Congressional district, 716 people have applied to study nursing this year, up from 135 in 2007.

In Bayside, Queens, admissions officers at Queensborough Community College have been flooded with 200 applications in the past two months from students who recently obtained their high school equivalency diplomas but have had trouble finding work.

And an increasing number of adults looking for a second income have been turning to the continuing education department at La Guardia Community College in Long Island City for classes in taxi driving and computer repair; enrollment in computerized bookkeeping for Windows is up 57 percent.

“This is unprecedented,” said Winston Yardy, Queensborough’s director of admissions. “When Circuit City lays off hundreds of employees, these are the students who are coming to Q.C.C. to prepare themselves for careers in electronic technology, not just jobs.”

After a decade of steady growth, the economic crisis has led to a spike in applications across the City University of New York’s community campuses. In September and October — one-third of the application period for the spring semester — the number of applicants who made a CUNY college their first choice was already 15 percent greater than all of last year. In some fields, like health services, the growth has been even more rapid, as much as 30 percent on some campuses.

The increased demand comes as CUNY is wrestling with how to deal with steep cuts in its budget. New York State has cut $99 million and New York City $11 million from CUNY’s $2.4 billion this calendar year. When state leaders gather next week to find some way to make up an expected $2.5 billion shortfall, school officials expect to take another hit.

In a telephone interview on Monday, Chancellor Matthew Goldstein said he would meet with the State Legislature and Gov. David A. Paterson to raise tuition next year, noting that it had been five years since there was an increase; current tuition at CUNY’s community colleges is $2,800 a year, compared with $4,000 at the system’s four-year colleges.

“How do you deal with a declining revenue base and more and more students wanting to come?” he asked. “It is a difficult balance and we worry about it every day.”

Abour 1,000 students attend the six community colleges, up from 62,000 in 1989. Past economic downturns in the early 1980s and early 1990s also spurred enrollment at the schools, and Dr. Goldstein said CUNY’s success would be measured by how quickly its leaders shift resources to bolster programs that are in high demand.

“When there is a downturn and growing unemployment, not all the economic sectors are impacted in the same way,” he noted.

The president of Hostos, Dolores M. Fernandez, said that the largest growth had been in nursing, radiological technology and dental hygiene, and that the school had used a work force development grant to offer nursing courses in the evening and on weekends.

“As the economy continues to be problematic, the students that come to Hostos will continue to be the least prepared and most economically vulnerable,” Dr. Fernandez said in an e-mail message.

Focus groups at Queensborough suggest that the demand is coming both from recent high school graduates and adults long out of school. Mr. Yardy attests to high school recruiting events frequently, said that he was getting an increasing number of inquiries from parents seeking classes for themselves.

He said one woman told him that her husband had just lost his job and that she was looking to develop some marketable skill. Another said she had always been a housewife but did not feel secure now without some type of job training.

Indeed, the city’s community colleges cater to a wide swath of students whose expectations and goals vary widely. For some, the schools are a first step toward a four-year degree; others are looking for career-specific training to give them an advantage in a competitive marketplace.

Regina S. Peruggi, president of Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, pointed to her school’s programs in tourism, hospitality and the maritime industry — areas with strong employment prospects in New York but few applicants.

Jane MacKillop, associate dean of La Guardia’s adult and continuing education division, focuses on helping people develop skills that make them more competitive. “People are trying to shore up their current positions by getting further qualifications and becoming certified in their field,” she said in an e-mail message. “Our taxi driver training program has seen a 5 percent increase this semester.

“Often people will take the course as a means to eventually earn a second income. However, our real estate license preparation course had no enrollments this fall. Not a huge surprise given the current housing market and credit crisis.”

La Guardia is also trying to tailor its curriculum, with the winter 2009 catalog including these new economy-related courses: How to Read the Financial Page; How to Recover From Bankruptcy; How to Economize in Difficult Times; and How to Stretch Your Dollar Online.