DISCOUNTED DREAMS: HIGH HOPES AND HARSH REALITIES AT AMERICA’S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

PBS INTRO: Welcome to the future. PBS Digital.

MALE VOICE: The price of higher education has gone up faster than anything else in the economy except health care.

FEMALE VOICE: The only people who will have access to a college education are those that can pay for it.

FEMALE VOICE: There are some glimmers of hope.

MALE VOICE: ...low cost, effective institutions..

FEMALE VOICE: Community colleges…

MALE VOICE: Community colleges are where this country is going...

FEMALE VOICE: …America’s open door to higher education.

MALE VOICE: Many of our students, they’re the first person in their family ever to go on to college.

FEMALE VOICE: Students of color, low income students, new Americans, everybody goes..

FEMALE VOICE: more and more and more

FEMALE VOICE: but without more money

MALE VOICE: It’s a scandal... we spend twice as much on an elementary school child.

FEMALE VOICE: community colleges provide access, but the question is access to what?

JOHN MERROW:
WHAT’S IT LIKE AT THE NATION’S 1200 COMMUNITY COLLEGES? WHERE NEARLY HALF OF ALL UNDERGRADUATES GO NOW — AND MORE ARE ON THE WAY. CAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES MEET THE DEMAND? I’M JOHN MERROW. COMING UP: DISCOUNTED DREAMS, HIGH HOPES AND HARSH REALITIES AT AMERICA’S COMMUNITY COLLEGES.

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IT’S SEVEN A.M. IN NEW YORK CITY, AND EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD KRISTAL JENKINS IS STARTING A TYPICALLY LONG DAY.
Discounted Dreams: High hopes and harsh realities at America’s community colleges

TRANSCRIPT

KRISTAL JENKINS: I’m not, I’m not really a morning person. I’m very exhausted.

KRISTAL SHARES A CRAMPED TWO BEDROOM APARTMENT WITH HER PARENTS, HER BOYFRIEND, AND HER DAUGHTER DESTINY.

KRISTAL JENKINS: I had her when I was fourteen-years-old. And I been taking care of her, alone, ever since.

A HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT WITH A G.E.D., KRISTAL SUPPORTS HER DAUGHTER AND A GROWING MENAGERIE OF PETS BY WORKING THE LATE SHIFT AT A SUPERMARKET.

KRISTAL JENKINS: It’s very stressful sometimes, and I’m tired.

IT’S THE BEST JOB SHE COULD FIND, BUT SHE WANTS MORE.

KRISTAL JENKINS: My daughter is motivating me, and this is something that I feel I was put on this earth for.

KRISTAL’S DREAM IS TO BE A VETERINARIAN. SO EVERYDAY SHE IS ON THE SUBWAY BEFORE EIGHT FOR A ONE-HOUR TRAIN RIDE TO THE ONLY PLACE THAT WOULD WELCOME SOMEONE WITH HER ACADEMIC BACKGROUND: COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

KRISTAL JENKINS: I’m very determined to pass.

KRISTAL JENKINS: That’s why I come every morning on time no matter how tired I am.

LIKE KRISTAL JENKINS, JENNICA DINNELL’S COLLEGE OPTIONS WERE LIMITED, EVEN THOUGH SHE DID WELL IN HIGH SCHOOL. HER DREAM WAS TO ATTEND THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA CRUZ, BUT SHE DIDN’T EVEN APPLY.

JENNICA DINNELL: I can’t get grants, I can’t get financial aid, and you know I would rather pay for it up front.

(sot) TEACHER: Dionysus in a boat…

THE SOLUTION FOR JENNICA WAS ALSO COMMUNITY COLLEGE. STUDENTS WHO’VE BEEN PRICED OUT OF TRADITIONAL FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES ARE TURNING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN DROVES.

JOHN MERROW: If there weren’t community college, where would you be?

JENNICA DINNELL: I don’t know. I wouldn’t have gone to college.

FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE JENNICA HOPES TO TRANSFER TO A UNIVERSITY. OTHER FORCES ARE DRIVING EVEN MORE STUDENTS TO COMMUNITY COLLEGES.
WHEN AN ON-THE-JOB INJURY FORCED CARPENTER DAVE RYNDERS TO TAKE
A DESK JOB, HE WAS WORRIED.

DAVE RYNDERS: I’ve been doing carpentry for eighteen years. I’ve always been out in
the field, working with my hands. Kind of more freedom. I’m not meant to be cooped up
in an office, that’s for sure.

BUT WITH NO OTHER SKILLS TO FALL BACK ON, AND A MORTGAGE TO PAY,
DAVE WAS IN A BIND.

DAVE RYNDERS: I’m locked in to working forty hours, full-time.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE OFFERED A SOLUTION FOR DAVE’S PROBLEM TOO.

NANCY SHULOCK: Changing careers is so much more frequent than it was before.
And the community colleges are ideally positioned for that.

FOR THOSE SEEKING A NEW VOCATION, COMMUNITY COLLEGES NATIONWIDE
OFFER A STAGGERING ARRAY OF OPTIONS, FROM WELDING...

(sot) COOK: I’ve got an omelet coming.

...TO CULINARY ARTS, TO HOMELAND SECURITY MANAGEMENT.

DAVE RYNDERS WANTS TO BE A NURSE. COMMUNITY COLLEGES TRAIN
SIXTY PERCENT OF THE NATION’S REGISTERED NURSES.

DAVE RYNDERS: I think it’s gonna’ be the greatest. You know, put down the hammer,
start ... pick up the stethoscope, and start helping people. I ... I honestly can’t wait.

(sot) TEACHER: Are you happy you’re learning English?

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ALSO OFFER CLASSES IN SELF-IMPROVEMENT,
WHETHER IT’S TO LEARN ENGLISH...

(sot) CLASS: Yes we are.

(sot) TEACHER: What do we do next? Reduce.

...GET A GED...

(sot): You want to leave a little bit of space in between your hors d’oeuvres.

...LIVEN UP A DINNER PARTY, OR LEARN HOW TO DANCE.

(sot) WOMAN: and how will we be helping you today?

DRAWN BY ALL THESE POSSIBILITIES, RECORD NUMBERS OF STUDENTS ARE
ENROLLING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES.
Discounted Dreams: High hopes and harsh realities at America’s community colleges

.TRANSCRIPT

(sot) **WOMAN:** Let’s look at math.

**CINDY MARTIN:** The enrollment is increasing tremendously. We’ve ... we’ve seen increases for the last five or six years, increasingly, twenty percent a year at times.

TWELVE MILLION MEN AND WOMEN ARE ATTENDING NEARLY TWELVE HUNDRED COMMUNITY COLLEGES THIS YEAR, SIX AND A HALF MILLION OF THEM FOR A DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE. THAT’S NEARLY HALF OF ALL UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE STUDENTS.

BUT THE GROWING NUMBERS ARE STRAINING THE SYSTEM.

(sot) **GIRL:** Twenty to enroll and a wait list of three.
**WOMAN:** So you’re planning then just to show up at class.
**STUDENT:** Yeah.

WAITING LISTS HAVE BECOME A COMMON PROBLEM...AND MONEY IS TIGHTER THAN EVER.

**KAY MCCLENNEY:** They charge a fraction of the tuition charged at four-year colleges and universities. A college may have a twenty percent enrollment increase at the very same time that they have a twenty percent decrease in the budget that’s available to serve those students.

BUT THE BIGGEST PROBLEM OF ALL: COMMUNITY COLLEGES, THE GATEWAY FOR PEOPLE LIKE KRYS TAL JENKINS, JENNICA DINNELL, AND DAVE RYNDERS ARE FAILING TO GRADUATE EVEN HALF THE STUDENTS WHO COME.

**KAY MCCLENNEY:** We’re losing students. We’re hemorrhaging students. We have to do a better job if this country is going to survive and thrive in the future.

IT WAS JUST OVER ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO IN THIS HIGH SCHOOL IN JOLIET, ILLINOIS, THAT THE FIRST COMMUNITY COLLEGE WAS CREATED TO GIVE STUDENTS A JUMP START ON COLLEGE. SINCE THEN, COMMUNITY COLLEGES NATIONWIDE HAVE OFFERED THE PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM TO COUNTLESS MILLIONS, MANY OF WHOM OTHERWISE WOULD HAVE HAD LITTLE CHANCE OF SUCCESS.

LIKE MOST PARENTS, THIRTY-YEAR-OLD JOSE SOSA AND HIS WIFE CLAUDIA WANT THE BEST FOR THEIR THREE CHILDREN.

**JOSE SOSA:** My kids... my kids are cool. Everything I do is pretty much for them. I wish they could have the ... a life that was secure, and ... no doubts of anything, ever.

BUT JOSE AND HIS FAMILY LIVE IN SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES, WHERE SECURITY IS HARD TO COME BY.

**JOSE SOSA:** It would be a good reality to have my kids out of here so that they wouldn’t see what, what goes on here.
JOSE SOSA: This is the neighborhood. It looks kind of crappy. It’s all ghetto. I want to get away from this.

SOUTH CENTRAL IS A POOR, LARGELY HISPANIC COMMUNITY. TURF WARS BETWEEN MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED STREET GANGS ARE A CONSTANT DANGER.

JOSE SOSA: Gang members, they’ll go into your neighborhood, you know looking for something, like...like problems, I guess.

JOSE SOSA: It’s a memorial for some kid. I guess he just got shot.. shot him to death. I can’t imagine me having one of these for my kid because he grew up in this neighborhood.

JOHN MERROW: Do you worry?

JOSE SOSA: All the time. Stray bullets. You hear, you hear gunshots, and, and you wonder if, if the next one's gonna penetrate the wall, or, or break my glass, or ... I hope my kids are laying down. It, it lessens the chances you know, if it's at night.

JOSE HAS SEEN HIS SHARE OF MEMORIALS IN SOUTH CENTRAL. HE WAS FIFTEEN WHEN HE MOVED HERE. BY SEVENTEEN HE WAS A DROPOUT, AND A GANG MEMBER.

JOSE SOSA: I used to break into houses, steal cars, break into cars. Steal from stores. Just steal. That’s how I learned to drive, in a stolen car.

AT NINETEEN, JOSE NEARLY HAD A MEMORIAL OF HIS OWN.

JOSE SOSA: I was right here. Car pulled up, started shooting. I ran. Ended up over there. Halfway down the block I hit the ground. My mind just went blank and then it was like, oh, it hurt, you know? I never thought I would get shot. And I got a scar right here and then I had a colostomy bag right here. And then all this, all the way down.

DETERMINED TO START OVER, JOSE QUIT THE GANG LIFE, AND HE AND CLAUDIA BEGAN THEIR FAMILY.

(sot) DAUGHTER: No, the teacher.

JOSE SOSA: When we found out that she was pregnant with my son, it just turned everything around. It was like now there’s something that I have to live for, something to strive for.

BUT WITH NO DIPLOMA OR WORK SKILLS, JOSE BOUNCED THROUGH A DOZEN JOBS IN TEN YEARS.

JOHN MERROW: Most of these were minimum wage jobs?

JOSE SOSA: The majority of them ... they were all minimum wage.

JOHN MERROW: Dead end jobs?

A YEAR AGO, WHEN HE WAS LAID OFF FROM A JOB IN THE SHIPPING DEPARTMENT OF A TEXTILE COMPANY, JOSE THOUGHT HE’D HIT BOTTOM.

JOSE SOSA: I felt like I let my family down. It was like ... you know, this can’t be happening. It just can’t be. At the time it sucked that I got laid off, but now I can say fortunately I got laid off. Because it gave me the time to look, to come to school.

JOSE CAME TO THIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE: LOS ANGELES TRADE AND TECH, IN DOWNTOWN L.A.

(sot) JOSE SOSA: I need another whole wheat over here with cheese.

IN THE KITCHENS OF THE COLLEGE, JOSE IS LEARNING TO BE A CHEF.

(sot) CHEF: I need an omelet working no mushrooms. WOMAN: I got it, ma’am

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE STUDENTS LIKE JOSE. THERE ARE NO ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS, AND TUITION IS A FRACTION OF WHAT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY WOULD CHARGE, OR A CULINARY SCHOOL.

JOSE SOSA: You hear about these places like Cordon Bleu, so ... I can’t afford Cordon Bleu. So I was like ... Well, this gotta be ... I guess the ghetto version. Something where I can afford and come to.

(sot) TEACHER: Okay you want to entice the reader.

LIKE MOST COMMUNITY COLLEGES, TRADE AND TECH OFFERS A FULL RANGE OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS, BUT JOB TRAINING IS ITS SPECIALTY. FIFTY-THREE PERCENT OF THE STUDENTS WHO ENROLL HERE ARE LOOKING FOR SKILLS THAT WILL PUT THEM DIRECTLY TO WORK.

JAMES LISANTE: We’ve all been you know told that part of the great American dream is to grow up to be a doctor and a dentist and a lawyer. But we’re not all cut out for that academic life. And there’s a lot of very good paying jobs, professions out there where you don’t need a four year college diploma.

(sot) JAMES LISANTE: Food cost divided by food cost percent equals sales price.

JAMES LISANTE IS TEACHING JOSE’S RESTAURANT MANAGEMENT CLASS, PART OF A FIFTEEN-MONTH PROGRAM IN CULINARY ARTS.

JAMES LISANTE: The emphasis here at Trade Tech is not producing cooks. It’s producing chefs. The difference between a cook and a chef is a cook cooks. And a chef is the chief. He runs the whole program.

(sot) JAMES LISANTE: What’s your food cost percent?
JAMES LISANTE: It’s challenging. Many of our students, they’re the first person in their family ever to get out of high school, or go to on higher education.

(sot) JAMES LISANTE: Food cost two ninety-five, sales price, eight ninety-five.

JOSE SOSA: When I started, I had my doubts whether I would make it through or follow through or not. When my mom died I was only seven so I didn’t really get much from my mom. My dad never forced me to do my homework so I never did homework. Never. It was all let’s go get high, okay.

NOW, JOSE WANTS TO KEEP UP.

(sot) JAMES LISANTE: OK, what’s my food cost?
JOSE SOSA: Five thirty-seven.
JAMES LISANTE: Five point three six seven.

JAMES LISANTE: Community college gives people who need a little bit more training and a little bit more academic background a chance to get it before they’re thrown into a real high pressure situation.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: Hey Sosa! I got a VIP table out there, two people, who are going to start out with calamari.

JUST A FEW MONTHS INTO HIS CERTIFICATE PROGRAM, JOSE’S TRAINING BEGINS TO PAY OFF. THROUGH TRADE AND TECH HE LANDS A JOB AT AN EXCLUSIVE BEACH CLUB IN SANTA MONICA.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: Sosa I want you to put a little bit of the herb on that pork

IT’S HIS FIRST COOKING JOB AND, AT TEN DOLLARS AN HOUR, IT’S THE MOST MONEY JOSE HAS EVER MADE.

WHITNEY WERNER: Jose is smart, he’s … he’s fast, he … he does what he’s told. He doesn’t talk back.

(sot) JOSE SOSA: The calamari’s coming sir.

WHITNEY WERNER: He just goes like the Energizer Bunny.

WHITNEY WERNER IS THE EXECUTIVE CHEF AT THE BEACH CLUB.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: Okay but I want it medium rare.
JOSE SOSA: Alright.

WHITNEY WERNER: Within five years, I could see Jose Sosa running a corporate restaurant, in ten years be an Executive Chef somewhere on his own, a hotel.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: Sosa I didn’t hear you.
JOSE SOSA: Two mini-burgers.
WHITNEY WERNER: And now it’s just a matter of honing his own management style as he goes up the ladder, it’s just sticking with it. And I think that ... that that’s definitely doable for him. I don’t see anything really holding him back.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: Wow he caught it! That was almost a chef’s nightmare there.

BUT JUGGLING A FULL TIME JOB AND A FULL TIME SCHOOL SCHEDULE WON’T BE EASY. THE DAILY COMMUTE ALONE TAKES JOSE FOUR HOURS.

JOSE Sosa: It’s pressure. I’m never home, I only go home to sleep. I haven’t had a weekend off in a long time.

LIKE JOSE, NEARLY HALF OF ALL COMMUNITY COLLEGES STUDENTS WORK FULL TIME. OVER A THIRD HAVE FAMILIES.

KAY MCCLENNEY: There are thousands upon thousands of people like Jose, making heroic sacrifices to take advantage of what these colleges have to offer. the challenge is that students come to community college juggling all these things that they juggle and they’re kind of dangling on their own. You will hear community college students talking about all the times they thought about quitting.

JOSE Sosa: Sometimes I still have my doubts just, you know, the pressure.

JOHN Merrow: You have a job ... a good job now.

JOSE Sosa: Mm-hm.

JOHN Merrow: Why not quit? Why bother finishing getting the certificate?

JOSE Sosa: It wouldn’t have been worth it.

(sot) WHITNEY WERNER: This is Jose Sosa, and he prepared for you the Corabuta pork.

DINER: That’s very nice, thank you.

JOSE Sosa: To have gone this far, and thrown it away. It would be like high school, and what's the point? And it's not ... it's not like that. This time it's ... I'm going to ... it's mine, I deserve this, I'm taking it.

BUT JUST 3 MONTHS BEFORE HE’S SCHEDULED TO GRADUATE, JOSE GETS BAD NEWS. HIS LANDLORD HAS PUT THEIR RENTED HOUSE UP FOR SALE. JOSE HAS THIRTY DAYS TO MOVE OUT.

JOSE Sosa: He served us a notice to vacate. So we’ve been looking since then. And that's where we're at now, just trying to get someone to say okay, we'll give you a shot.

WITH LITTLE MONEY, HE’S HAVING TROUBLE FINDING A PLACE.

UNDER PRESSURES LIKE THIS, EVEN THE MOST DETERMINED COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS CAN FALTER.
JOSE SOSA: I’m afraid that I’m gonna give up and I can’t, I can’t give up. We’ve had our share of hard times and we don’t need it no more. We need a good life. And I’m hoping that school’s gonna do it for us. It better …It better…

FOR JENNICA DINNELL, AND MILLIONS MORE LIKE HER, A FOUR YEAR DEGREE IS THE WAY TOWARD A BETTER LIFE. JENNICA WANTED TO ATTEND THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA CRUZ, BUT SHE DECIDED IT WOULD BE CHEAPER TO START AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE, EVEN THOUGH SHE HAD RESERVATIONS ABOUT IT.

JENNICA DINNELL: Both my parents went to college. I didn't want to go to a two-year school. You know, I didn't see it as being college. I thought of it as being, like well, I'm not good enough to go to a four-year school.

(sot) TEACHER: Okay that’s archaic.

BUT WHEN SHE BEGAN CLASSES AT SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE JENNICA WAS SURPRISED BY WHAT SHE FOUND.

JENNICA DINNELL: The class sizes are smaller, and the campus isn't as big, you know you don't feel as, I guess, overwhelmed as if you would if you walked into a hall with three hundred other people,

JENNICA WANTS A BACHELOR’S DEGREE IN ART, AND AFTER TWO YEARS HERE, SHE’LL BE ABLE TO TRANSFER TO A FOUR YEAR COLLEGE AND ENTER AS A JUNIOR. SHE’S SAVING THOUSANDS, AND SHE LIKES WHAT SHE’S GETTING.

(sot) TEACHER: We want four lines and it’s going to be very abstract, and then we’ll start pulling out all the representation later, okay?

JENNICA DINNELL: You do get more one on one attention.

(sot) TEACHER: You need to really start thinking about filling up these negative areas.

JENNICA DINNELL: Right now I have a couple of professors that I've had for like more than one class, and it's really nice, because you know where they are, they're easy to get a hold of.

KAY MCCLENNEY: Typically in community colleges, you’re going to find those smaller class sizes. Typically you are going to find courses that are taught by faculty members rather than graduate assistants. Typically you're going to find that there is a higher degree of personalization.

(sot) WAYNE HULGIN: We’re really focusing on bringing something larger into the picture.

WAYNE HULGIN TEACHES PAINTING, DRAWING AND ART HISTORY AT SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE.
WAYNE HULGIN: I love this school. I love the diversity of this school. Everyone’s so
different and they all have different needs.

(sot) WAYNE HULGIN: Cause what we’re also going to do is we’re also going to rotate
the canvas.

WAYNE HULGIN: I’m not only their teacher, I’m also, I feel I’m also a mentor to them.
I’m also a best friend, a counselor. I’m many things besides an educator.

NANCY SHULOCK: The faculty at community colleges are teaching faculty. They don’t
have the split loyalties to their, you know, research and teaching. Not that they aren’t
scholars, and not that they may not do research. But they’re not there to be researchers.
They’re there to teach. They like to teach.

(sot) WAYNE HULGIN: You got it.

STUDIES SHOW THAT STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE THEIR FIRST TWO YEARS
AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THEN TRANSFER TO A FOUR-YEAR SCHOOL
MAY EVEN HAVE AN ADVANTAGE.

NANCY SHULOCK: Once they’re at the four year institution here in California, they do at
least as well as, if not better, than what we call a native student.

BUT THERE ARE OBSTACLES TO TRANSFERRING, AS JENNICA DINNELL SOON
DISCOVERED.

JENNICA DINNELL: I wanted to take Art History, because it was, you know, an interest
of mine, but I couldn’t get in. So I had to take ... I took Humanities instead. So I had two
semesters of Humanities that, you know, don’t really count for anything, but they’re
there.

IT’S A COMMON COMPLAINT.

STUDENT: I really wanted to take a chemistry course this semester and I was unable to.
They were all full. It wasn’t even that there wasn’t a time that I could take it, it was just
they were all full.

STUDENT: I haven’t been able to take a science yet. Every time I go to register for one
of those classes it’s been like closed since like the day after it opened for registration.

CLASS SHORTAGES AND LONG WAITING LISTS ARE PROBLEMS AT MANY
COMMUNITY COLLEGES.

TERRY BURGESS: I can’t offer all of the courses that are really demanded.

TERRY BURGESS IS PRESIDENT OF SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE.

JOHN MERROW: We heard a number of stories from students that said basically, I had
to go here for three years or four years because I couldn’t get the courses I need.

TERRY BURGESS: Mm-hm.
JOHN MERROW: Is that a common experience?

TERRY BURGESS: It's very common. And in the circles that I move we kind of refer to it as the five-year plan because the typical community college student who ultimately completes an associate degree, takes about five years on average to do that.

JOHN MERROW: A two-year college?

TERRY BURGESS: A two-year college.

(sot) NURSE: What I want to do here is I want to go ahead and take my bag off of here this time, and I can actually hold it over like that.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE NURSING PROGRAMS, THE MOST POPULAR PATH TO A CAREER IN NURSING, TAKE EVEN LONGER.

DAVE RYNDERS: My first semester, I couldn't get any kind of pre-reqs at all. I talk to a lot of people that are just taking one or two classes, they need three, they can only get one. A lot of people don't make it in.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS AS A CARPENTER, DAVE RYNDERS DECIDED TO BECOME A NURSE. HE ENROLLED AT SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE, NEVER EXPECTING WHAT LAY AHEAD.

DAVE RYNDERS: My two-year nursing education is gonna take me about six years to complete, with all my pre-reqs, and then my waiting period, and then finally the ... the accelerated two year nursing program. It's kind of ridiculous.

WHILE THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS LIKE DAVE RYNDERS SIT ON WAITING LISTS, INSIDE U.S. HOSPITALS, NURSES ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY. COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN'T AFFORD TO TRAIN THEM.

TERRY BURGESS: It ultimately comes down to a resource issue.

JOHN MERROW: Money?

TERRY BURGESS: Money.

TERRY BURGESS: The state pays us for what I like to refer to as butts in the seats. So I could have a psychology lecture with one hundred or one hundred fifty students in it and one professor, or I could have a nursing clinical with ten students and one professor and the state reimburses me the same rate for whether it's the nursing student in that setting or whether it's a psychology student in another setting.

(sot) NURSE: Take a deep breath.

KAY MCCLENNEY: Nursing is a very expensive program. At any given community college, the real cost of educating a nurse may be four times the amount that the college actually receives in terms of state funding for educating those students.
COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FUNDING CHAIN. ALTHOUGH THE NUMBERS DIFFER FROM STATE TO STATE, IN CALIFORNIA, TOP STATE UNIVERSITIES GET FOURTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS FROM THE STATE FOR EACH STUDENT. K THROUGH TWELVE SCHOOLS GET ABOUT EIGHT THOUSAND DOLLARS PER STUDENT. COMMUNITY COLLEGES GET ONLY ABOUT FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS PER A STUDENT.

INADEQUATE FUNDING ALSO LIMITS STUDENT SERVICES.

NANCY SHULOCK: They can’t get in to see a financial aid advisor. They can’t get in to see a counselor. They can’t get other kinds of services. So it has a very real impact on students.

JENNICA DINNELL FOUND THAT OUT THE HARD WAY. LIKE MANY 18-YEAR-OLDS, SHE WASN’T SURE WHAT SHE WANTED TO STUDY OR WHAT COURSES SHE NEEDED TO TAKE TO TRANSFER. THAT’S WHERE A COUNSELOR IS SUPPOSED TO HELP OUT.

JOHN MERROW: What’s the ratio of counselor to student?

EDWIN HIEL: like fifteen hundred students to one.

JOHN MERROW: Did I hear you right? Fifteen hundred students per counselor?


EDWIN HIEL: It is not even a transferable course.

EDWIN HIEL IS A COUNSELOR AT SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE.

JOHN MERROW: Suppose every student at this community college wanted an hour of your time, or a counselor’s time. What would that mean?

EDWIN HIEL: Well, that would mean that counselors wouldn’t go home. Yeah, no, there’s no way that practically that could be accomplished.

KAY MCCLENNEY: I don’t think that that sort of ratio is an anomaly. And I do think it’s a concern. Students tell us year after year that the most important service is academic planning and advising.

JENNICA FINALLY DID SEE A COUNSELOR, BUT IT DIDN’T HELP.

JENNICA DINNELL: I go in there and I picked out a class and I asked them, you know, is this one transferable? And they like pulled up my information and they’re like, yeah, it is. Well, come to find out, you know, I'm trying to transfer and now I'm probably I think two classes short, because classes that they said were transferable to a UC were only transferable to a state.

JOHN MERROW: You got bad advice?

JENNICA DINNELL: Yeah.
JOHN MERROW: Are you upset about it?

JENNICA DINNELL: Yeah. I mean, that’s, not only was it a waste a time, because they were, you know, they didn’t transfer, I don’t have the credits, and I paid for them. So I mean that’s money out of my pocket that I lost on textbooks, on, you know, the credits themselves.

JOHN MERROW: Time and money.

JENNICA DINNELL: Yeah.

EDWIN HIEL: Okay, you’re aware then you’re also going to lose the 5 units of credit for Spanish.

A HANDFUL OF COUNSELORS CAN’T KEEP TRACK OF THE HUNDREDS OF SCHEDULES THEY’RE ASKED TO ARRANGE.

STUDENT: When I first came here people always said don’t see a counselor. Whatever you do just follow the curriculum of the four-year university that you want to go to and just do it by yourself and I actually did see a counselor and I ended up taking like three classes that I never ever should have taken.

JOHN MERROW: One student said, the secret to going through the college is avoid advising.

TERRY BURGESS: Ouch. We’re doing all we can with the resources that we have. If I had 60 full time counselors here at City we would be doing a whole lot more proactively than we’re able to do.

STUDENT: The more paranoid side of me almost wants to trace it back as far as you know it just being money. There are not a lot of rich kids that go to this school you know there not a lot of kids from prestigious communities that go to this school. There not a lot of kids whose parents are directly involved with politics that go to this school.

DESPITE THE PITFALLS, BAD ADVICE, TROUBLE GETTING HER CLASSES, AND THE TWO AND A HALF YEARS SHE’S INVESTED IN A TWO-YEAR PROGRAM, JENNICA DINNELL IS STAYING AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

JENNICA DINNELL: If I transfer to UC Santa Cruz, you know the school that I always wanted to go to, then it all worked. I hope it will work. I know it will work. I’ll make it work.

BUT FOR THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS IT WON’T WORK. TWO OF EVERY THREE WHO SEEK TO TRANSFER NEVER MAKE IT THROUGH TO A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE.

TERRY BURGESS: It isn’t for a lack of trying on the college side. I’m mean you would be amazed at the level effort that we put in looking for ways in which we can retain more of those students until they achieve their educational goal.

MANY BELIEVE THE FAILURES ARE NOT THE COLLEGES’ FAULT.
TERRY BURGESS: The reason that we're not more successful I think is largely attributable to, not a lack of effort on our part but due to the complications of student's lives.

KAY MCCLENNEY: The students are so busy, their lives are so challenging that they have three to four times the risk that they bring with them to college than students who go to four-year colleges and universities, and they don't really intend all of them to get degrees or certificates. Those arguments are the truth. But the problem is, community college people have all too often hidden behind that truth. With that truth as our shield, we have been able to defend ourselves against this massive reality that we simply don't get enough of our students through to successful outcomes.

PART OF THE PROBLEM MAY BE THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAVE BRANCHED OUT, OFFERING THINGS FAR BEYOND JOB TRAINING AND ACADEMICS, LIKE DANCING AND CAKE DECORATING, AND MUCH MORE.

JOHN MERROW: Ghost Hunting. Fitness Light & Easy. Conversations That Matter. Is that part of the mission of a community college?

KAY MCCLENNEY: Yes, because they're community colleges, and most of the people that enroll in those aerobics classes or theater classes or the like are people who vote in local elections that provide bond issues, millages and that kind of support for the education that goes on locally.

CONTINUING EDUCATION, AS IT'S CALLED, HAS GROWN AS BUDGETS HAVE SHRUNK.

KAY MCCLENNEY: Colleges have been more or less forced into an entrepreneurial mode. That means they need to go out and get money, get resources in whatever ways are possible without so much reliance on the public purse.

JOHN MERROW: Doing that sort of thing, whether it's game show fun or movies from the golden era, doesn't that take away resources from the mission?

KAY MCCLENNEY: Yes and no. The no part is that I know of no place where those kinds of courses are offered that they're not offered on a break even or even profit-making basis. The yes part is that it diverts institutional energy and attention.

MEANWHILE, THE MILLIONS OF STUDENTS ARRIVING REQUIRE MORE ACADEMIC HELP THAN EVER. MANY COASTED THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, OTHERS DROPPED OUT.

NANCY SHULOCK: It's open access, almost across the country. So students say, well, I don't have to worry about getting in, I'm just going to community college. And so then they get to the community college, and they're struck by the fact that, goodness, this is a college. I'm not ready to be here.

BEFORE THEY'RE ALLOWED TO ENROLL IN COLLEGE LEVEL CLASSES, STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO TAKE PLACEMENT EXAMS IN MATH AND ENGLISH.
MIKE KIRST: These placement exams are fairly difficult. A lot of them are pegged at the level of what you would need to do if you went to a four-year college. And the majority of students fail these placement exams. So, they then put them in remediation, and you often have to take three remedial courses before you can take a regular course.

ON SOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUSES, MORE THAN EIGHTY PERCENT OF INCOMING FRESHMEN ARE IN REMEDIAL, OR DEVELOPMENTAL, CLASSES.

(sot) TEACHER: We’re going back to chapter four again, four point six…

THEY’RE BEGINNING THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE IN WHAT ARE REALLY HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES, LIKE SCOTT OLESEN’S BASIC ALGEBRA CLASS AT JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS.

JOHN MERROW: How many of you hope to transfer to a four-year school when you finish?

BUT THESE STUDENTS HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO. BECAUSE THEY DID SO POORLY ON THE PLACEMENT EXAM, THEY’RE FACING THREE SEMESTERS OF REMEDIAL MATH.

STUDENT: In high school I fell asleep from like January to March I think sometime in this class so like when I woke up some time in mid-March I was like what the hell is going on?

STUDENT: I took it about two years ago when I was coming out of high school and I didn’t pass it. And so now I came back and I’m taking it again.

STUDENTS: I don’t know how I got in here anyways cause I took geometry and trig and everything and now I’m back at algebra where I started in like eighth grade.

WHILE STUDENTS MUST PAY FOR THESE CLASSES, THEY DON’T COUNT TOWARDS GRADUATION.

STUDENT: We’re behind. Like really behind. So, when we advance to the next level, it’s only to catch up.

IF THEY ADVANCE. THE PASS RATE IN REMEDIAL MATH CLASSES AT JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE HOVERS NEAR FIFTY PERCENT, ON A PAR WITH MANY OTHER COMMUNITY COLLEGES. STUDENTS WHO FAIL MUST REPEAT THE CLASS.

THAT’S WHAT’S HAPPENED TO EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD KRYSRAL JENKINS. SHE CAME TO LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN NEW YORK FOR A TWO-YEAR DEGREE IN VETERINARY TECHNOLOGY.

SHE’D LIKE TO TRANSFER TO A FOUR-YEAR SCHOOL, BUT FOR THE LAST YEAR AND A HALF SHE’S BEEN STUCK IN REMEDIAL MATH, TRYING TO MAKE UP FOR WHAT SHE MISSED IN HIGH SCHOOL.
KRYSTAL JENKINS: I never really understood math too much, so this class has always been a problem for me.

(sot) GEORGE MCCORMACK: Good morning, my name is Professor McCormack.

KRYSTAL HAS FAILED THIS CLASS THREE TIMES WITH THREE DIFFERENT PROFESSORS.

KRYSTAL JENKINS: This class is the only class that's holding me back from moving on to things into my major.

UNTIL SHE PASSES SHE CAN’T TAKE ANY VETERINARY TECH CLASSES. KRYSTAL SAYS THIS WILL BE HER LAST ATTEMPT.

KRYSTAL JENKINS: If I do not pass, I probably would stop going to school. Just because of the math. And if I do pass I will be very happy and I will definitely move on and continue going to school.

GEORGE MCCORMACK: This is a demanding course, there's no question about it.

(sot) GEORGE MCCORMACK: The course really starts with operations on real numbers...

GEORGE MCCORMACK IS KRYSYL'S FOURTH REMEDIAL MATH TEACHER.

GEORGE MCCORMACK: It's mostly material that should have been covered in ninth and tenth grade. And it's supposed to be presented at a ... at a college rate.

(sot) GEORGE MCCORMACK: The real numbers are...they build up from sets.

GEORGE MCCORMACK: It's a lot of school time. And it’s not like they can really miss any of it because the course is demanding. I always tell them school is the most important thing right now, because that builds your foundation for whatever else you want to do.

(sot) KRYSTAL JENKINS: Did her mother say she could come?

BETWEEN CARING FOR HER FOUR-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER AND WORKING HER SHIFT AT A GROCERY STORE, IT’S TOUGH FOR KRYSYL TO MAKE SCHOOL THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN HER LIFE.

KRYSTAL JENKINS: I'm working full-time, and I don't have other time, the extra time to go study, and sit down and review my notes and stuff.

GEORGE MCCORMACK: There's a lab section on Thursday that you go for two hours.

EVEN WITH HER BUSY SCHEDULE, KRYSYL SAYS SHE IS DETERMINED TO FIND A WAY TO PASS.

KRYSTAL JENKINS: I think there’s a ninety percent chance that I’ll pass the class. It’s the professor, he’s very helpful.
GEORGE MCCORMACK: I’m always around, so if you have a question, come see me.

PROFESSOR MCCORMACK HAS BEEN TEACHING DEVELOPMENTAL MATH FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS, THE LAST FOUR AT LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

GEORGE MCCORMACK: What I want them to understand from day one is that I’m here to help them. But they have to kind of, they have to become independent students, they have to, um, they have to attempt this work on their own and those who are doing that I can’t help but, you know, work with them and help them succeed.

GEORGE MCCORMACK HAS BEEN TRAINED TO TEACH REMEDIAL CLASSES. MOST REMEDIAL TEACHERS DO NOT HAVE SPECIALIZED TRAINING.

MIKE KIRST: I think we just trust that like higher education, you don’t need any special training to do this, and I think there’s a lot of evidence that you do.

ARIC EIDADU: Everyone with me on page three twenty nine?

THE EVIDENCE IS PLAIN TO SEE IN CLASSROOMS LIKE THIS ONE AT LOS ANGELES TRADE AND TECH.

ARIC EIDADU: Turning the page to page three thirty, and we look at the example for a comma splice.

WHILE THE TEACHER WENT OVER SENTENCE STRUCTURE WITH ABOUT HALF THE CLASS SITTING IN FRONT, STUDENTS IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM WERE WEARING HEADPHONES OR READING MAGAZINES.

JOHN MERROW: Developmental teaching I’ve been told is a specific skill.

ARIC EIDADU: Yeah, it is.

JOHN MERROW: Do you have training in that?

ARIC EIDADU: Yeah, I have hands on, Do I have hands on training? I’d say hands on training. Do I have training in college? No, I wouldn’t say that. But I have hands on training, practical training.

ARIC EIDADU: This is what happens: I might get in trouble for saying this but a lot of times these are the classes that are very challenging and a lot of the people who are kind of higher up won’t necessarily take these classes so someone like myself, kind of a new faculty member to whatever school, we’re placed here, we’re placed in some of these courses that some teachers might not want to grasp. So as being placed within
these particular classes over that period of time that’s my training. So we’re kind of put on the battlefield so to say.

JOHN MERROW: Sink or swim.

ARIC EIDADU: Yeah, pretty much so.

(sot) SCOTT OLSEN: Begin foiling, first, two X times X...two X squared.

JOHN MERROW: What’s your background as a teacher?

SCOTT OLSEN: My background is actually...I’m a biology major. And I’ve been with the college for a little bit over 30 years now. My full time job here at the college is web administrator. I’m the webmaster for the Joliet Junior College. And for the last 10 years I’ve been teaching this course as a part-time instructor.

(sot) SCOTT OLSEN: X minus five and X plus five.

JOHN MERROW: Is it hard to teach remedial classes?

SCOTT OLSEN: Yes it is. Sometimes the classes are very difficult to work with. Different skill set levels within the course. And it is difficult to get students to interact.

(sot) SCOTT OLSEN: Any questions about chapter eight, anything about the test that you want to review, make a comment about, we’ll go from there. If not...okay.

STUDENT: If he wasn’t so boring maybe we’d be so motivated. He’s got such a mono...

OTHER STUDENT: Monotonous.

STUDENT: There you go. Voice.

(sot) SCOTT OLSEN: The product of those two numbers..

STUDENT: It’s either I sleep here, or make it til break and just leave.

JOHN MERROW: Now, I was watching the class and there was one student who was text messaging. There was student working on a history paper, and there was student working on another paper. Are you aware of that?

SCOTT OLSEN: Yes. It’s their responsibility if they want to get anything out of this course.

JOHN MERROW: So, you don’t want to walk over and shake them?

SCOTT OLSEN: No. I’m not gonna deal with that. No, that’s their situation.

JOHN MERROW: It’s here, if they want to learn it.

SCOTT OLSEN: That’s right.
JOHN MERROW: So if they don’t pass, you’re not going to lie awake at night?

SCOTT OLSEN: No. I’m not.

IN THE LAST TWO YEARS, SCOTT OLSEN’S AVERAGE PASS RATE FOR HIS REMEDIAL MATH CLASS WAS ONLY FORTY-FIVE PERCENT.

JOHN MERROW: Do community colleges put enough effort, energy and resources into remediation?

KAY MCCLENNEY: No. Almost none of them do. And that happens for a number of reasons. One is a political and image reason. I think community colleges long ago tired of being the sort of stepchild of American higher education and most of them don’t want to become known as that remedial institution down the street.

(sot) EDY ALDERSON: Okay, everybody, let’s get started.

THESE REMEDIAL TEACHERS AT JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE ARE PROUD OF WHAT THEY DO.

EDY ALDERSON: We’re helping them develop those skills that they have, filling in some of those holes.

(sot) EDY ALDERSON: So why don’t we do this first, everybody get in your group, try to stay on this side of the room.

HANDS ON ACTIVITIES AND GROUP WORK ARE A BIG PART OF THIS ENGLISH CLASS, TEAM-TAUGHT BY EDY ALDERSON AND KATHLEEN PERRYMAN, BOTH FULL-TIME FACULTY.

(sot) KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: In these four sentences there are ten errors. The errors might be grammar…

EDY ALDERSON: They learn from each other. If one doesn’t feel secure or may have a little more knowledge they help the other ones.

(sot) STUDENT: So that would be…it is the exterior because that would be the outside of the car.

EDY ALDERSON: It also builds a rapport with students to know that we’re in this together, that their learning is not just up to them.

JOHN MERROW: You move around a lot; is that by design?

KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: If you’re standing behind that podium and say you just give out a worksheet to your students how do you know the guy in the back of the room isn’t text messaging his friends?

(sot) EDY ALDERSON: Alright. Are you ready?

AND THEY HAVE THEIR OWN WAYS OF MOTIVATING STUDENTS.

THIS IS THE FINAL ROUND OF WHAT THEY CALL THE WORLD SERIES OF WORDS.

EDY ALDERSON: Polly has compromised genetics because she’s an inbred. Does that make sense? STUDENTS: No.

KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: It’s just a way to get your students involved.

EDY ALDERSON: Because they’re so supportive of each other, students who might never speak out in another class will speak out in this class.

EDY ALDERSON: The zoologist decided to go into the animal’s ecosystem to inbreed the nearly extinct parrots. STUDENT: That is great.

EDY ALDERSON: When you’re engaged in it, hard work can be enjoyable. And I think that’s one of the lessons that we want them to learn and they know that.

TO KEEP THEM GOING, THEY REWARD THEIR STUDENTS WITH PRIZES, WHICH THEY PAY FOR THEMSELVES.

EDY ALDERSON: It’s a little reward. Its something fun.

KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: They worked on this all semester. And if you had seen the sentences that they were writing in September…

EDY ALDERSON: They were pathetic.

KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: Versus the sentences that they were writing now – I’m mean, it’s the progress that they made and we keep telling them there will be a prize at the end so they come prepared. Many people go by the philosophy that students have the right to fail. And I don’t abide by that philosophy.

EDY ALDERSON: We think they have the right to learn to succeed.

KATHLEEN PERRYMAN: They have the right to learn to succeed.

EDY ALDERSON: We will hand out averages.

IN THE LAST TWO YEARS, EDY ALDERSON AND KATHLEEN PERRYMAN’S AVERAGE PASS RATE WAS SEVENTY PERCENT.

BUT CLASSES LIKE THEIRS ARE RARE. THEY ARE EXPENSIVE TO RUN, AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE NOT SET UP TO SUPPORT THEM.
NANCY SHULOCK: All the incentives are on the wrong end of a student’s career. They’re all for getting students in the door. Colleges are not funded or rewarded for getting students out. We buy enrollment. When I say we, states buy enrollment.

MIKE KIRST: They run essentially a business model known as a churn model.

JOHN MERROW: Churn.

MIKE KIRST: Churn. So, the churn model is the following. As long as the number of students coming in the front equals the number of students dropping out the back door and the side door, their enrollment in full time equivalence is the same.

JOHN MERROW: Whether they’re graduating or leaving?

MIKE KIRST: Exactly. So there is no incentive to spend a lot of the money to serve these students with special counselors and teaching programs.

BACK AT LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN NEW YORK CITY, KRystal JENKINS IS STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP IN HER REMEDIAL ALGEBRA CLASS.

(sot) GEORGE MCCORMACK: Krystal Jenkins.

KRystal JENKINS: I’m doing, um, not so well, not great, not where I want to be but it’s better than from all the other times that I’ve taken this class. I’ve actually got a passing grade rather than a failing grade. It’s more than a zero, so I’m happy about it.

AFTER SCHOOL KRystal GRABS LUNCH ON THE RUN. WITH A YOUNG DAUGHTER TO SUPPORT, SHE HEADS OFF TO WORK, A FULL SHIFT OF CHECKING GROCERIES AHEAD OF HER.

KRystal JENKINS: I stand on my feet seven to eight hours a day.

SHE FINALLY GETS OFF WORK AT NINE THIRTY. BY THE TIME SHE GETS HOME, IT’LL BE A SIXTEEN HOUR DAY.

KRystal JENKINS: At the end of the day I am exhausted and tired and just ready to go to bed. There is no chance at all that I will study tonight when I get home.

NOR DOES SHE HAVE TIME TO MEET WITH HER PROFESSOR ONE-ON-ONE. BUT WITH A FINAL EXAM APPROACHING IT’S CRITICAL THAT SHE BE PREPARED. IF KRystal FAILS THIS TEST, SHE’LL FLUNK REMEDIAL MATH AGAIN. SHE WON’T BE ABLE TO MOVE ON TO THE CLASSES SHE NEEDS TO BECOME A VETERINARY TECHNICIAN.

KRystal JENKINS: This one test, I try to not think about it. But I do think about at least once a week. And when I do think about it then, usually I feel like I want to cry. Because I feel like that’s going to make the biggest difference in my life.

FINALLY THE DAY OF THE TEST ARRIVED. KRystal WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.
SHE STAYED HOME BECAUSE SHE THOUGHT SHE WOULD FAIL.

KRYS'TAL JENKINS: I didn’t feel ready for the final at all. Because I was so tired. It all came crashing down I think. The whole semester I’ve been doing so much at one time and I think just because it’s the end everything just came together and I just couldn’t deal with it anymore. I just wasn’t strong enough to handle it.

HER TEACHER, GEORGE MCCORMACK, OFFERED HER ONE MORE CHANCE.

KRYS'TAL JENKINS: The final was very, very difficult.

IN THE END, TWENTY-FIVE OF PROFESSOR MCCORMACK’S THIRTY ONE STUDENTS DID WELL ENOUGH TO MOVE AHEAD. BUT NOT KRYS'TAL JENKINS. SHE FAILED REMEDIAL MATH FOR THE FOURTH TIME.

KRYS'TAL JENKINS: I find it very unfair. I think there should be another option, seeing that I failed the class three times previously, so I think that I will just stop going to school.

KRYS'TAL COULD TAKE REMEDIAL MATH YET AGAIN BECAUSE LAGUARDIA, LIKE MOST COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAS NO LIMIT ON HOW MANY TIMES A STUDENT MAY REPEAT A REMEDIAL CLASS.

KAY MCCLENNEY: George Bernard Shaw said something about a peculiar form of insanity, that consists of doing the same thing over and over again and believing that you’ll get different results. And that’s a form on insanity in which we’ve engaged for a long time in education.

NANCY SHULOCK: Somebody has to offer remediation. And no other institution is stepping up to do it and I think the community colleges have to be credited for what they’re doing. The problem, the issue in my mind is whoever does it, it needs to be done right. And we have to stop fooling ourselves that it’s cheap.

KAY MCCLENNEY: if we don’t become infinitely better at the remedial education mission, we are not going to succeed as institutions and our students won’t succeed.

JOHN MERROW: Remediation is first among equals?

KAY MCCLENNEY: Job one.

EVEN IF COMMUNITY COLLEGES CHANGE THE WAY THEY TEACH, FOR SOME STUDENTS IN SOME SITUATIONS IT MIGHT NOT BE ENOUGH.

BACK IN SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES, FORMER GANG MEMBER JOSE SOSA’S DREAM OF BECOMING A CHEF IS IN JEOPARDY, JUST SHY OF GRADUATION. THE FAMILY’S RENTAL HOUSE WAS UNEXPECTEDLY PUT UP FOR SALE, AND THEY HAVE NOT BEEN Able TO FIND A PLACE TO MOVE TO.

JOSE SOSA: We have five days, five days to be out and we have nowhere to go. So it’s getting tougher everyday. It was like, what did I do now? You know really, literally
like, I’ve already paid for all my bad stuff that I’ve done but then it was like, I guess I haven’t.

JOHN MERROW: You thought it was like some sort of punishment?

JOSE SOSA: Yeah, it’s gotta be. I think the things that I’ve done before are bad, and they come around.

JAMES LISANTE: Here’s somebody that’s trying so hard, has turned his life around, is supporting a wife and children and is now going to be out on the street? There’s something wrong there. If things go OK for him, he’s not going to be a tax drain, he’s gonna be pumping lots of money into the system because he’s gonna be making good money.

THREE MORE DAYS PASS, AND STILL NO WORD. IN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS JOSE’S FAMILY COULD BE ON THE STREET. HE GOES TO WORK AT THE BEACH CLUB, THE JOB HE FOUND THROUGH HIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

JOSE SOSA: When I got in today, I came in real down.

CHEF: Order up!

THEN JOSE GETS THE BREAK HE’S BEEN LOOKING FOR.

JOSE SOSA: I’ve been trying to get out of LA and it finally came through. Thanks to the guys here. This guy, come here, come here Jose-Luis. This guy got me a place to stay!

FRIEND: This is the man right here!

TWO DAYS LATER JOSE MOVES HIS FAMILY INTO THEIR NEW APARTMENT, IN DOWNEY.

JOSE SOSA: Downey is a much nicer neighborhood than South Central. Now when they say where you living? I can say Downey. It’s not South Central no more.

IN JUNE 2006 JOSE SOSA’S PERSISTENCE PAID OFF. HE JOINED MORE THAN SEVEN HUNDRED THOUSAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY WHO EARNED DEGREES OR CERTIFICATES.

JOSE SOSA: I’m excited. This is for my kids. I do want them to see that this is what you go for, so you can walk, so that you can be announced.

(sot) ANNOUNCER: Jose Sosa. Culinary Arts.

JOSE SOSA: I tell them to take advantage of what they’re learning now. I can’t stress how important it is to do the school thing you know.

JOHN MERROW: Do you think they listen?

JOSE SOSA: I hope. I hope that I’m setting an example now that they can follow.
Discounted Dreams: High hopes and harsh realities at America’s community colleges

SINCE GRADUATING, JOSE HAS CHANGED JOBS. HE’S NOW WORKING AT ANOTHER UPSCALE RESTAURANT IN SANTA MONICA, WHERE HE’S EARNING FIFTY PERCENT MORE THAN HE DID BEFORE GOING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

DAVE RYNDERS IS STILL WAITING TO GET INTO NURSING SCHOOL. A BOOST IN STATE FUNDING ADDED FIFTEEN SPOTS TO SAN DIEGO’S NURSING PROGRAM. NOT ENOUGH TO SHORTEN DAVE’S WAIT, WHICH HE EXPECTS TO BE ANOTHER TWO YEARS.

DAVE RYNDERS: Eventually I’ll see all the legislators, me or someone like me will see these legislators, in my hospital, and uh, then I can tell them what I think. As they’re receiving low-level care because they didn’t fund the programs.

JENNICA DINNELL MADE IT TO THE SCHOOL OF HER DREAMS, UC SANTA CRUZ, WHERE SHE IS NOW A JUNIOR STUDYING ART. SHE GOT THERE DESPITE THE ODDS: TWO THIRDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO HOPE TO TRANSFER NEVER MAKE IT.

KRYSYAL JENKINS IS WORKING FULL-TIME AT AN OLD NAVY STORE. HER COLLEGE, LAGUARDIA, RECENTLY INTRODUCED A PILOT PROGRAM TO HELP STUDENTS WHO’VE FAILED REMEDIAL MATH TWICE. BUT KRYSYAL ISN’T IN IT. FOR NOW, SHE’S GIVEN UP ON COLLEGE, ALTHOUGH SHE STILL OWES LAGUARDIA MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS. HER DAUGHTER DESTINY STARTED KINDERGARTEN IN FALL 2006.

IF ENROLLMENT TRENDS CONTINUE, BY THE TIME DESTINY GETS TO HIGH SCHOOL, WHAT EXPERTS CALL A TIDAL WAVE OF STUDENTS, FIFTY PERCENT INCREASES AT SOME PLACES, WILL HAVE LANDED AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ALREADY STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP.

NANCY SHULOCK: There is a lot of concern among people who look at these trends, that we as a society have simply not given the community colleges the resources that they need to do the job that we expect. We keep expecting them to do more, and more, and more. And at some point, I think we’re gonna realize that, you know, that it doesn’t add up. It’s frequently said, community colleges have to be all things to all people. And it is a very, very difficult thing to try to do.

MIKE KIRST: This has to change. You can no longer treat this as some kind of stepchild, second class institution that ought to be supported at less than the high school per pupil expenditure. If it doesn’t change, we risk half our labor force and half our adults getting less education than they might have gotten.

KAY MCCLENNEY: If we can’t find ways to more effectively educate beyond the high school level, larger numbers of our population, including especially those that have traditionally been underserved, we as a country are going to sink like a rock. This is not the right time in our history to be saying, oh, we were only kidding about educational opportunity to low-income people, students of color, first generation college students. They’re the future. They are the growing majority of the American population and we can’t choose to close that door.
Discounted Dreams: High hopes and harsh realities at America’s community colleges

TRANSCRIPT

(stand up) JOHN MERROW:
CONTROL THE MONEY AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES THEMSELVES. WE’LL
FIND OUT JUST HOW STRONG THE COMMITMENT IS TO THOSE WHO ARE
SEEKING TO ACHIEVE THE AMERICAN DREAM.

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