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New Meaning for Night Class at 2-Year Colleges

By [ABBY GOODNOUGH](#)

BOSTON — Winston Chin hustles on Tuesdays from his eight-hour shift as a lab technician to his writing class at Bunker Hill Community College, a requirement for the associate's degree he is seeking in hopes of a better job.

He is a typical part-time student, with one exception. His class runs from 11:45 p.m. to 2:30 a.m., the consequence of an unprecedented enrollment spike that has Bunker Hill scrambling to accommodate hundreds of newcomers. In the dead of night, he and his classmates dissect [Walt Whitman](#) poems and learn the finer points of essay writing, fueled by unlimited coffee, cookies and an instructor who does push-ups beforehand to stay lively.

Similar booms have forced many of the nation's 1,200 [community colleges](#) to add makeshift parking lots, rent extra space and keep thousands of students on waiting lists this fall. While Bunker Hill offers two midnight classes — the other is Psychology 101 — and **Clackamas Community College** in Oregon holds welding classes until 2 a.m., others have added classes as early as 6 a.m. to make room for the jobless and others whom the [recession](#) has nudged back to school.

The deluge also includes an unusually large number of recent high school graduates, diverted from more expensive four-year colleges by the economic downturn.

"I liken myself to the old woman who lives in a shoe," said Mary L. Fifield, the president of Bunker Hill, where enrollment is up 16 percent over last fall. "The seams are tearing, and people are just popping out all over."

Virtually every state is dealing with enrollment booms at community colleges, the American Association of Community Colleges says, with some in California

reporting increases of 35 percent. The demand comes amid deep cuts to higher-education budgets, but also at a hopeful time for community colleges: [President Obama](#) recently announced a \$12 billion plan to increase the number of community college graduates by five million by 2020.

“It shines a spotlight on a sector of higher education that by and large has been viewed as the lowest rung on the ladder,” Dr. Fifield said. “Now we have the president of the United States talking about community colleges as an engine that will drive and sustain economic success in this country.”

Most of the students in Mr. Chin’s writing class, who range in age from 18 to 59, are employed but hoping a degree will lead to more stable, higher-paying jobs. Some start work as early as 4 a.m. or finish as late as 11 p.m., making the class time more appealing. They include a taxi dispatcher who dreams of going to medical school, a Dunkin’ Donuts cashier who wants to be a homicide detective and a landscaper who wants to be a state trooper.

The group cracked jokes and gently mocked one another for mispronouncing the word “blithe” or not reading aloud passionately enough. When the instructor asked around 2 a.m., “Who’s ready to answer the question?” one student wearily answered, “Who’s confused?”

Mr. Chin, who took the midnight class because other writing classes were full, wants to become a surgical nurse. At 57, he has three small children and has not been a student since graduating from high school.

“I probably would have taken something early in the morning if I’d had my pick of classes,” he said. “But this is working out. I never really need more than about four hours of sleep anyway.”

Mr. Chin and his classmates get plenty of parking — a rarity at community colleges these days. Holyoke Community College, in Holyoke, Mass., where enrollment is up 13 percent over last fall, turned its tennis courts into parking lots; it also sent postcards to all 7,500 students urging them to take public transportation to class.

At Northern Virginia Community College, more than 20 classes start before 7 a.m. this fall; many other colleges have classes running as late as 11 p.m.

But with state allocations down sharply this year because of the economy, many community colleges have not been able to keep up with the demand. At Miami Dade College, whose 170,000 students make it the nation's largest community college, about 30,000 could not get every class they wanted this fall; about 5,000 others were shut out completely.

At De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif., about 8,000 students found themselves on wait lists last month, as did 7,500 students at Central Oregon Community College. And in New York City, where the six community colleges that are part of the [City University of New York](#) experienced a record 9 percent enrollment increase this fall, most closed enrollment early for the first time.

Because of budget cuts, Miami Dade College could not add a single new class this fall despite an influx of more than 33,000 new students. Instead, it has eliminated 1,200 class sections over the last two years, said Eduardo J. Padrón, the college president.

"It's an almost desperate situation," Dr. Padrón said. "My heart breaks for these students, because I know many are the ones who really need us the most."

Colleen Roach, Bunker Hill's spokeswoman, said higher student fees and an influx of federal stimulus money helped the college offer dozens more classes this fall. It is planning to add a third midnight course, Sociology 101, next spring, along with five business and science courses that will run to 11:45 p.m.

Dr. Fifield said putting dynamic instructors in charge of the late-night classes was crucial.

"Not everyone is going to be able to keep people awake until 2:45 in the morning," she said.

Wick Sloane, who teaches the midnight writing class at Bunker Hill, tried to transport Mr. Chin and the other students from the windowless, concrete-walled classroom one recent night with an essay by [Edward Abbey](#), the nature writer,

about encountering a mountain lion in the New Mexican desert. When one student answered a question with a giant yawn around 2:15, Mr. Sloane asked, "Can everyone make it about 15 more minutes?"

For homework, he assigned an essay analyzing Calpurnia's rhetoric in [Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar,"](#) leading one student to ask whether Shakespeare used an alias. The room started buzzing with opinions.

"Do you want to stay and debate who Shakespeare was?" Mr. Sloane asked.

They did not, but not for lack of enthusiasm. "He's got me engaged," Mr. Chin said, "which is not easy at this time of night."

Lisa W. Foderaro contributed reporting from New York.