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1,500 students ask lawmakers for funds for community colleges

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AUSTIN – James Casarez, the 27-year-old president of the Eastfield Student Government Association, traveled 200 miles Wednesday to ask his state representative one question.

"With the economy how it is, what kind of aid can we expect from the Legislature this year?"

Casarez was one of nearly 1,500 community college students at the Capitol to express concern about the economy and the rising cost of tuition.

Lawmakers are predicting budget cuts in the coming months, but it is early in the budgeting process.

Enrollment in community colleges spiked 16 percent statewide last fall and about 10 percent this spring, giving the Dallas Community College District 72,000 students last month – substantially more than either the University of Texas and Texas A&M University. And growth estimates, according to several community college presidents, continue to climb.

Many of the students, like Casarez, are taking a second shot at college. Most are in their late 20s, and many work and have families. Others are facing layoffs and a shrinking job market that makes going back to school appealing – if they can afford it.

Textbooks can cost hundreds of dollars more than classes. Schedules can be difficult to coordinate with jobs and children, requiring students to stretch two-year curriculums into three- or four-year endeavors. And even small expenses, like 5 cents for a photocopy, add up.

"I wanted something more in life, and more for my family. The only way to get that is to get a sustainable education," said Casarez, who awoke at 5 a.m. for the bus ride to Austin. "And we're in Austin to get more of what we need to be successful, which is funding."

That funding amounted to \$1.7 billion in 2007, and colleges are hoping for an increase of \$300 million-\$400 million this session. They also hope to adjust the formula used to tabulate those funds, which is based on "contact hours" rather than conventional "credit hours," and to work toward more-affordable textbooks.

They also hope the state will fund more of the formula this year than the 52 percent it offered two years ago. The other options are raising local property taxes or tuition.

"Research shows that our students are the most cost-sensitive," said Steven Johnson, of the Texas Association of Community Colleges. "Every dollar you raise in tuition reduces the odds that a student

will enroll."

Lawmakers praised the visiting students and their schools, but none has offered concrete promises. Reps. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, and Dan Branch, R-Dallas, who Casarez and his friends met, both offered a receptive ear but said the economy is too uncertain to predict increases.

"I don't think there's any question that the Legislature wants to increase funding for community colleges," said Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, vice chairman of the Senate Higher Education Committee.