

BTC, Whatcom brace for another round of budget cuts

KIRA M. COX - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - While Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College officials know they have to make more budget cuts, the exact amount to trim still isn't known.

As part of the supplemental budget that was passed by the state Legislature earlier this month, community and technical colleges across the state are facing a second round of budget cuts in their 2009-11 biennial operating budgets.

At Whatcom Community College, officials are forecasting a cut of about \$650,000, which is about a 5 percent reduction. That is on top of the \$1.2 million that was cut out of both the 2009-10 and 2010-11 operating budgets last spring during the state Legislature's development of the biennium budget.

At Bellingham Technical College, officials are forecasting a 6 percent cut, which equates to about \$700,000. With the new cuts, over the past three years BTC's state funding has been reduced by about 20 percent, according to college officials.

At both colleges, some of the reductions will be offset by a previously announced statewide tuition increase of 7 percent for the 2010-11 school year. This is in addition to the 7 percent tuition increase that was implemented statewide for the current year.

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges will be informing individual colleges of their exact state allocation reductions in coming weeks.

At WCC, many cuts that were implemented for 2009-10 will continue for the upcoming school year, including fewer purchases of instructional equipment and materials, staffing freezes and limited library resources. Decisions about the new cuts will not be made until the exact budget reduction number is known. However, officials are looking at ways to increase efficiencies, including continuing to tighten class and lab schedules.

At BTC, officials will continue with strategies that were started during the fall to handle this school year's cuts. That includes keeping vacant positions unfilled, using grant funding and reserves to avoid layoffs as much as possible and freezing non-essential spending throughout campus.

The colleges also are seeing large increases in the number of students asking for tuition assistance. At WCC the number of students turning in the Federal Application for Student Aid has skyrocketed, with more than 3,000 for the current school year compared to just 440 applications for the 2007-08 school year.

Both schools have had record enrollment during the recession and budget cuts. At BTC enrollment has increased about 25 percent since 2007. To meet the needs of those students, officials have added extra class sections where possible, increased some class sizes and increased student capacity in some programs. Faculty has been added for expanded programs when state and federal grant money has been available.

"The continued increase in enrollment and the continued decrease in funding have been challenging, to say the very least," said Tom Eckert, BTC president. "However, throughout this economic downturn we have been determined to keep our programs open and our staff working. ... We provide real hope for those who have lost their jobs, a chance for individuals to take back control of their lives when a layoff may have made it seem otherwise."