

Local Colleges dig deeper to meet Budget Cut Demands

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The newest round of budget cuts for state agencies is leaving Whatcom County's higher education institutions looking for ways to cut about \$4.3 million.

Gov. Chris Gregoire announced just before Thanksgiving that state agencies, including state colleges and universities, need to cut an additional \$260 million from their current operating budgets.

For Western Washington University, this means cutting about \$1.3 million, which is on top of the \$2 million reduction the university was asked to make earlier this fall. Those cuts come from WWU's \$75 million state apportionment, or about 2.6 percent of its current operating state apportionments for the 2009-11 biennium budget.

Those cuts aren't definite, and exact numbers won't be available for months, but university and college officials are looking at what cuts like that would mean, while lobbying that reducing education options when people are losing their jobs is a bad idea.

"We're still hoping that the legislature sees us as part of the solution and doesn't hit us as hard," White said.

number of students turning to two-year colleges for transfer degrees, Eckert said. But it may also cause some two-year college students to be priced out of the market.

Retraining: Two-year colleges also get a boost during a recession from people who have been laid off and are looking for a way to make themselves more marketable in a competitive job market.

At BTC, the number of people in the worker retraining program has more than doubled since fall 2007, with about 190 people enrolled this fall. The program helps people who have been laid off from places like Alcoa Intalco Works and Georgia Pacific learn new skills or improve their skills so they can find a new job.

Job placement: Many of the programs that two-year colleges offer are in professions that are still in demand during a recession.

For example, at Whatcom Community College the nursing program is still popular, with graduates easily finding jobs. For the on-line physical therapist assistant program, every student who graduated in the spring was hired somewhere.

At BTC, officials have seen a job placement slowdown, but many graduates are still getting hired, especially those with skills that can be used in refineries and other industrial settings.

"People are still hiring, especially in areas where repairs are a big part of the industry because people are choosing to fix rather than buy new," Eckert said. "There is a certain sector of the economy where things are still going on, like process technology and instrumentation."

LOOMING BUDGET CUTS

Even with the increased popularity of two-year colleges, they're facing the same 20 percent budget reduction as other state agencies.

But college presidents argue that colleges have a significant positive impact on the economy because people can get a degree or get trained quickly, making them more likely to find a job and therefore spend money.

"Community colleges are the answer to a lot of the problems in the recession and the critical player in the economic recovery as well," said Linda Maier, dean of workforce education at WCC. "We pride ourselves on being very responsive to community and industry needs."

College presidents are lobbying legislators who will work on the 2009-11 biennium state budget to reduce the cuts their institutions may have to take. Many are worried that tuition will increase beyond affordability and programs will be eliminated.

Nothing is definite at this point, but both Eckert and Hiyane-Brown said their staffs are looking at every option and hope to keep as many programs as possible, especially the ones with high wages and a secure job outlook.

"Recessions tend to end, and one of the things we need to keep in mind is out there ahead of us still looms the demographic and education challenges that we were talking about three or four months ago before the economy swept in," Eckert said. "We're still facing a skilled workforce shortage. We're still facing baby boomer retirement."

"One of the things about two-year colleges is we not only provide short-term solutions, whether it be workforce retraining ... or preparing people," Hiyane-Brown said. "(We also provide) long-term solutions in building the economy and the workforce."

"This is the time we're needed the most and then we're facing these significant budget cuts," Eckert said. "We need to get students out there and employed to help the economy."