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Cuts at Skagit college likely to hit 60 jobs

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MOUNT VERNON — The jobs of 60 people at Skagit Valley College could be either eliminated or reduced in hours by the end of June due to budget cuts being handed down by the state.

Some staff members have already been told they likely will be part of the cutbacks, and others will learn their fate this week, said Anne Ziolkowski, the copresident for the school's faculty union, called the Skagit Valley College Federation of Teachers.

"We are in a huge crisis," Ziolkowski said. "Some (staff) will be entirely losing their jobs, and some will be asked to take cutbacks and reductions to their time."

Staff last week received an email from college President Gary Tollefson, explaining how the state's budget crisis will affect operations here — by at least \$4 million in the next two years.

Tollefson's message did not include how many staff would be affected. He could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Over the past three years, the college's state funding has been reduced by 26 percent, his e-mail states. College spokesman Carl Young said that the college has had \$4.8 million in state cuts since the 2008-2009 school year. The college's 2009-2010 operating budget was \$29.4 million. Tollefson's letter said that past cuts minimized the impact on the classroom. Last year's cut of \$1.6 million was through staff attrition alone. But not this time. "Now that we are facing a \$4 million problem, we are in a position where we cannot avoid very significant personnel impacts," Tollefson wrote.

Ziolkowski said that Tollefson met with the employee union groups last week and is starting to meet with the staff who will lose their jobs or work hours.

"We are devastated — all of us — as is our administration and our board of trustees, everyone, that we have to make these cuts," Ziolkowski said. "We are all in this together, we feel — and it's going to be worse for some people than for others."

It's a scenario being played out throughout the state, said Janelle Runyon, the director of communications for the Washington State Board of Technical and Community Colleges.

"Right now all of the colleges are over-enrolled," she said of the system, which includes 34 community colleges. "All of the colleges have wait lists."

At the beginning of the winter quarter, 386 students were on wait lists for classes at Skagit Valley College. The figure includes duplicate listings for some students for multiple classes, but it is more than double the same figure from one year ago, when 111 students didn't make it into the classes they wanted.

Earlier this year, the state Legislature asked college leaders to craft several hypothetical budget-cut scenarios.

Depending on the severity of the cuts, between 26,000 and 38,000 students would go unserved statewide. Campuses might also cut programs, cut transfer course options, eliminate late-night or weekend courses and reduce classes for English as a second language.

Program cuts were not mentioned in Tollefson's email, and it was not known Tuesday afternoon whether the college would cut any programs.

In February, the college announced it was discontinuing the paralegal and the electronics programs. Students currently studying those fields would get to finish out their education.

Two years ago, the state Legislature — the only body that can approve tuition increases — approved a 7 percent

increase for each of the two following years.

The state currently has a \$5 billion budget deficit for the next two years.

That figure could grow Thursday when the state Office of Financial Management releases its quarterly forecast. The forecast will serve as the Legislature's baseline for further program cuts.

Skagit Valley College has campuses in Mount Vernon, Oak Harbor, Coupeville and Friday Harbor.

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