

What college's cuts mean for students, staff

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MOUNT VERNON — The width of Skagit Valley College's "open door" will tighten this year as classroom space shrinks due to a \$5.5 million budget gap left by state cuts.

President Gary Tollefson said the school, by law, is considered an "open door" institution, meaning students may take tests to determine their level of course work, but there are no admission requirements.

With deep cuts to state funding, Tollefson said student waiting lists will grow longer, classes will be fuller and services will be limited, hurting the school's ability to serve any student willing to pay tuition.

"It's not closed, but it's less open than it was before all these cuts," Tollefson said.

A projected \$5.5 million budget hole has prompted the school to eliminate 38 positions and not refill a number of positions. The cuts will also reduce the two-year college and university transfer classes at college centers in Clinton and Friday Harbor to online courses.

The Oak Harbor campus of the college will share in the staffing reductions, but the full impact has not yet been determined.

This time, it's personnel

After three years of state reductions, the college has tapped out travel, special programming and other savings around campus. Tollefson said this time he had to cut people.

The cuts may get worse, as the state just released its revenue forecast Thursday afternoon, predicting tax collections will be down another \$780 million. The Legislature bases its two-year budget on that forecast. College officials had earlier based their budget cuts on a forecast that would reduce college funding by \$4 million in the next two years. In anticipation of the reduced state funding, officials will eliminate or reduce hours for 60 jobs at the school.

The cuts mean 38 employees will lose their jobs at the end of June, including 20 faculty members. Three vacant positions will not be filled, 10 people took early retirements or voluntarily separation agreements, four staff will see reduced hours and the revenue source of five more employees' pay will be shifted away from state funds and toward some other revenue source.

Mary Alice Grobins, vice president of administrative services, said most of the affected positions are fulltime.

Anne Ziomkowski, copresident of the school's faculty union, said the process has been "pretty traumatic."

"We knew it was going to be bad," she said of the upcoming budget cycle, "but I didn't think it was going to be this bad."

The worsening state revenue forecast means the school will have to cut more positions, Ziomkowski said.

"That's the only place they can go," she said. "There's nothing else. Through the last couple of years they've cut everything but personnel."

She said the school has about 120 faculty members. Cutting 20 of them means the school would lose more than 16 percent of its faculty.

Tollefson said more than three-quarters of the staff who will be impacted by the cuts were notified by the end of the day on Thursday.

More online, less in-person

Lower staffing will affect student life more than almost any other reduction of the last three years. With 20 tenured, temporary or probationary positions to be eliminated and six tenured retirements remaining unfilled, students will have access to fewer classes.

The college already has a long waiting list for classes. At the beginning of the 2011 winter quarter, a record 386 students could not get into their desired classes. Tollefson said that will get worse next year.

While no additional programs will be cut, on-site instruction on San Juan Island and South Whidbey Island will be nearly eliminated in favor of online learning.

Those sites have served the school for more than 30 years, and combined enroll 400 full- and part-time students.

Mick Donahue, executive vice president for instruction and student services, said those students will have access to online classes offered to students across the region. Students will still have access to some beginning math and English classes, as well as support services and advising.

Most other classes, which are primarily two-year basic education and university transfer classes, will be offered online.

“The centers will become more of a student services center,” Donahue said.

A three-year trend

These new cuts are the latest in a three-year trend of diminishing state funding for community colleges. From 2008 until the beginning of the 2010-11 school year, the school lost \$3.5 million in state funding. The state also implemented two mid-year cuts over this school year totaling \$1.1 million.

The school will have about \$4.4 million more to cut before the 2011-12 school year.

The cuts are a doubleedged sword, Tollefson said, because reducing the number of classes means reducing the number of students who can come through the door, and that means less tuition revenue for the college.

Some programs are already being eliminated. Students in the paralegal and electronics departments will be allowed to finish their programs, but no more students will be accepted.

The 38 positions eliminated this week follow 22 positions that were cut for the 2009-2010 budget.

Tollefson said he based much of the cuts on conversations he had with state legislators, who seemed reticent to make deep cuts to social services. But he said a struggling economy has created more demand for retraining.

“With so many people being out of work, we play a substantial role in the community in retraining people for new jobs,” Tollefson said. “Some of that capacity is impacted here.”