

Best option for LCC was cutting programs

Lane Community College is at a crossroads. The state's disinvestment in community colleges is taking its toll. We are facing a \$4.7 million budget shortfall next year, following the \$12.6 million shortfall this year. Even under current legislative proposals, LCC would have less state funding per student than in the 1999-2001 biennium. Oregon is 46th in the nation in higher education funding.

Our budget will be further challenged beginning in 2017, when the Oregon Supreme Court's reversal of legislative Public Employees Retirement System reforms takes effect.

During the Great Recession, we at LCC opened our doors wide. We made room for all who wanted to continue their education and improve their skills, despite the lowest level of state funding in two decades. We increased course offerings and hired more part-time faculty and staff to meet demand. Then, as the economy began to improve and people went back to work, we saw a dramatic decrease in enrollment.

Over the past decade we have balanced our budgets, provided modest increases in compensation to our employees, and retained vital programs and services — all within the constraints of lower state funding. Students have done their part. In the last decade, tuition has increased 52 percent. Everyone has sacrificed under the disinvestment in our education system. I am proud of everyone at LCC who made it work despite the challenges. However, many of the remedies we used are no longer available.

LCC has done a good job of navigating the funding decline, but balancing the budget with non-recurring adjustments and hoping that something will dramatically change at the state level will no longer work. We must develop a balanced budget within the constraints of fiscal realities, though we will never give up fighting for adequate state funding.

This is not easy. Almost 85 percent of our budget is for people, and students are providing an increasingly larger part of our revenue — 44 percent. We can't make much progress without affecting our people or our students, and members of the college's board are clear in saying that they do not want further tuition increases this year.

Continuing to do everything we have done before to cover the deficit — cutting back on materials and supplies, dipping into our ending fund balance, holding vacant positions open — precludes us from



making necessary investments in our programs and services to ensure student success.

Thinning the soup does not work. We must make tough decisions to offer the career and technical programs that are most likely to benefit students and the community.

This year, the board directed the administration to focus on the expense side of the equation to develop a balanced budget proposal. Using multiple criteria developed over years of budgeting and with board approval, we identified a short list of programs to consider for reduction. We also sought information from the state Employment Department on job trends and sought feedback from focused employer interviews to confirm or disconfirm our findings.

We identified two programs for elimination — Auto Body and Electronics. Enrollment in these programs has declined significantly more than other programs, completion rates are low and the labor market does not provide enough jobs for the number of students enrolled. Reducing the class size to align with the job market is not economically feasible.

We will redesign a third program, Medical Office Assisting, to better reflect the changing workplace. To avoid an interruption in service and accommodate students already in the pipeline, we will admit one class this fall into the program as it now stands. Simultaneously, we will work with employers throughout next year to update the curriculum for the fall of 2016 at the latest.

There is no more heart-wrenching work than to cut a program. Behind every line item on a spreadsheet there are dedicated faculty who have made a commitment to LCC, their programs and our students. But the college also has an overarching commitment to provide programs that are responsive to job market trends and the local economy. Students will still have a choice of more than 40 career and technical certificate and degree programs, including many that offer additional credentials.

It's time to face Oregon's fiscal reality. We must make tough decisions now so we can achieve a more sustainable budget over time and stop the never ending cycle of budget reductions and tuition increases.

If we make the difficult decisions now, we can work toward stability and a clear focus on our mission to provide educational opportunities to promote student success.

Mary Spilde is president of Lane Community College.



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