

News

College scrambles to cope with cuts

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While other B.C. colleges have begun to announce program and staffing cuts in the wake of a 2.6 per cent funding decrease, Okanagan College is trying to put a positive light on the changes, saying that growth at the college will continue. They're just not sure yet what form it will take.

Every year for the past three years, explained Allan Coyle, director of public affairs at the college, colleges have been getting funding letters spelling out what they can expect not only for the current year, but also projecting what they can expect for the following two years.

This March, however, Okanagan College and other colleges around B.C. were surprised when the provincial government announced that they were making changes to the funding formula,

with the 2.6 per cent cut a major part.

Since the inception of Okanagan College, they had been getting funding for about 190 full-time equivalent spaces for new students, and Coyle said the college had gone into the budget process for 2008/09 based on the April 2007 information, that there would be funding for 190 new students, consistent with previous years.

But along with the funding cut, the province also announced it was re-examining the allocation of Strategic Investment Plan spaces — stemming from an announcement several years ago that the government would be funding 25,000 new seats.

“That’s where the 190 for Okanagan College had been coming from,” said Coyle. “In the reassessment of the seats, the government chose to give Okanagan College not 190 seats, but 250.”

The end result is that the college is being asked to grow faster in 2008/09 than had been planned, and also to find a way to pay for it with about a \$1 million less in funding than expected.

After setting a target to create 25,000 new post-secondary spaces, the B.C. government has seen students lured away to a hot job market, and acute shortages in nursing and skilled trades due to booming construction and a wave of baby boomer retirements.

“We’ve asked them to target their funds for this year,” Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell said. “We’re not doing block funding, we want to target nursing, trades, technology and aboriginal spots.”

Coyle said that had already been a major focus for Okanagan College. In the first year, they focused on trades, and in their second year targeted nursing as well as continuing to grow the trades faculty.

“We’re being asked to do more with less than expected and our commitment is that we will do everything in our power to do that,” said Coyle. “We have the capacity, we’ve identified some areas where that will be possible.”

Other colleges around the province have responded to the funding changes with warnings of staff layoffs and program cuts, like the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, where four academic programs are slated for cancellation to make up their \$1.1 million shortfall.

While there will be changes at Okanagan College, Coyle says it’s still too early to say what form they will take, adding that the college is trying to avoid those kind of changes.

“It’s a challenge ... our commitment is to avoid layoffs, avoid, as far as possible, any cuts in services,” he said. “We’ll be looking for some efficiencies, but the important message is that the growth at Okanagan College will continue.

“With 250 new seats there will be program growth but we can’t say exactly what form that will take until the new budget is approved by the board of governors.”