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What would 15% cut mean for state’s colleges?

Washington’s public college and university presidents decline to make a “hit list” of programs to cut and say less money would mean higher tuition and lower enrollments.

By Katherine Long
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Double-digit tuition increases. Class cuts that would make it harder to finish a degree in four years. Enrollment cutbacks that would make it more difficult to get admitted to a state university.

Washington’s public college and university presidents, warning that a hypothetical 15 percent cut to higher education would be devastating to public colleges and universities, are in a standoff with the state Office of Financial Management (OFM) over fiscal planning for the next two years.

 Asked to name programs they would cut and put them in order of priority, the state’s six public four-year schools all ignored that exercise — instead describing a scenario of impacts such as lowered enrollments and higher tuition.

University of Washington President Michael Young said the university simply has no more places to trim — and in any case, he believes Gov. Jay Inslee’s budget-cutting exercise was really meant to send a signal that more reductions would be catastrophic.

“This alone should get people’s attention,” Young said. “Is this the direction we want to head?”

OFM Director David Schumacher said the exercise was, indeed, meant to show what a budget without any new revenue would look like. “This is not a scare tactic,” he said. “This is a practical exercise.”

State rules do require budget managers to create a balanced budget, he said, and some agencies might need to submit more information so OFM itself can identify cuts.

“If we need a few percents out of somebody that didn’t provide it, we will do that ourselves,” he said.

Every agency in the state was to have submitted a priority cut list Friday as part of their budget requests for 2015-17. Schumacher couldn’t say whether the six schools were the only state agencies that didn’t identify specific cuts.

“We’ve got kind of a wide variety of responses, and we haven’t quite figured out what we’re going to do with anybody,” he said.

Agencies were asked to say how they would slim down by 15 percent, Schumacher said, because the economy in much of the state has still not fully recovered from the recession, and because the state Supreme Court has mandated a big increase in K-12 spending under the McCleary school-
funding decision.

"McCleary, in budget-math terms, is like another recession," he said.

Schumacher, who was appointed by Inslee in 2013, has been traveling around the state for the past few months with a presentation showing why the next budget will require cuts if there’s not an increase in revenue.

About two-thirds of the state’s budget is protected by constitutional and federal requirements — categories such as K-12 education, pensions and mandatory Medicaid. Budget cuts must come from the remaining one-third of the budget, which includes higher education, state prisons and social services. And some of those categories — prisons, for example — are very difficult to trim.

Since the beginning of the recession in 2008, one of the hardest-hit segments of the state budget has been higher education. It’s the principal reason why state college tuition has increased so fast.

Young and the state’s five other public college and university presidents sent a letter to Inslee last week pointing out that “a 15 percent reduction in funding would not only completely undo recent progress but would also put our state back on the path of historic state disinvestment in public higher education.”

In its budget submission to OFM, the UW said it would have to reduce enrollments and increase tuition “moderately or significantly.”

Washington State University said it would need to raise undergraduate, in-state tuition by 17 percent, or eliminate programs and services for 4,000 students.

Western Washington University said it would need to increase tuition by double digits, cut about 18 percent of its class sections, reduce enrollment by 1,759 or drop state support for three of Western’s seven colleges.

Central Washington University said it would need to cut class sections, the equivalent of reducing enrollment by 1,400 students. Eastern Washington University said it would need to increase tuition a minimum of 11 percent for each of the next two years, or increase class size and reduce student services.

Young, in an interview Monday, and WWU President Bruce Shepard, in a separate letter to Inslee, said the universities can only get real reductions by cutting their most expensive programs — the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) courses — programs that often involve specialized classes, costly lab equipment and faculty members who command higher salaries because they’re more in demand in the marketplace.

Shepard sent a message to faculty and staff in mid-August, explaining that WWU wouldn’t create a “hit list” of programs to be cut because such exercises are bad for morale.

The budget-cutting exercise was a small part of the 2015-17 budget requests that all agencies submitted. So the budgets are also composed of wish lists, should money be there to fund other things.

Both the UW and WSU, for example, want money for a 4 percent raise both years for faculty, staff and graduate students who teach. WSU wants $2.5 million to begin a medical school in Spokane, and the UW wants $8 million to develop the WSU-Spokane-based campus of the five-state medical-school program, called WWAMI.

Some higher-education leaders were sanguine about the exercise.

“There’s not going to be a 15 percent cut,” said Marty Brown, who once headed OFM himself and now is executive director of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. “But I think for the governor and the Legislature, it gives them some options, and it also shows them the
consequences.”

Brown said his budget would show 15 percent in cuts when it is submitted Wednesday. (Although the budget documents were due Friday, about 20 percent of agencies were running late.)

“You can whine all you want, but the governor asked,” he said.

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