

More students, shrinking budget at CCCC

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SANFORD — Central Carolina Community College officials are holding their breath as state lawmakers continue to craft their final budget proposals in the coming week.

Millions of dollars are at stake for CCCC and North Carolina's 57 other community colleges, which have seen surging enrollment numbers while the state's economy has plummeted and unemployment has skyrocketed.

Whether enrollment increases are fully funded will depend on budget negotiations between N.C. House and Senate legislators. CCCC President Bud Marchant said he also is concerned about a proposal that could eliminate a fee waiver for high school students who sign up for community college courses.

"As of yet, a lot of questions are unresolved," Marchant said. "We understand we will take some sort of hit, but we don't know what form that will take."

Community colleges often see an increased demand during a recession because unemployed workers seek job training and new skills. CCCC has been no exception — marking a rise of more than 11 percent in students enrolled during the recent spring 2009 semester compared to spring 2008.

Enrollment has begun for the fall semester, and Marchant said all signs point to more blockbuster numbers.

"We are seeing a marked increase in the number of people coming through the doors who want to continue their education," he said.

Marchant, who has been on the job at CCCC for about a year and came from South Carolina, said he was concerned about one budget proposal that could make it more expensive for high-schoolers to take classes at community colleges.

That proposal would limit the number of dual enrollment classes, meaning high school students might have to pay full-price for their tuition. High-schoolers typically can get that waived, a program that makes North Carolina's community college environment very enviable across the southeast, Marchant said.

"It's a real plus for students who want to get ahead," he said.

Community colleges in the state are funded by a combination of state and local funding, similar to K-12 education. The state provides money for instructional costs, while counties fund facilities.

Lee County will give CCCC nearly \$2.5 million this fiscal year, about the same amount as last year. Part of that will go toward the closure of the school's dilapidated Jonesboro campus and a move to mobile pod units at the W.B. Wicker Business Center.

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