Where’s the vision?

Chico State’s president looks for hope amid painful budget numbers

By Melissa Daugherty
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Running a public university isn't easy. That’s especially true in these days of economic insolvency. Campuses are at the whim of the state, and right now our representatives at the Capitol are weighing by far the most massive funding cuts in the history of California higher education.

Gov. Jerry Brown’s proposed budget calls for reductions in state funding of a whopping $1 billion combined for the California State University and the University of California systems. Community colleges would be hit to the tune of $400 million. The unprecedented cuts are part of his plan that includes $12.5 billion in reductions for the 2011-12 fiscal year. The budget is designed to help stem the estimated $25 billion budget deficit.

The CSU and UC will share the cuts equally: $500 million apiece. That’s a colossally huge amount—nearly one-fifth of each system’s annual allocation.

During a sit-down interview last week in his Kendall Hall office, Chico State President Paul Zingg reflected on Brown’s announcement, calling it dreadful. He wasn’t just talking about the numbers. He knew the CSU would face cuts, and he expected them to be painful. But Brown’s plan lacked vision. “It falls short of explaining where we’re going and what hopefully will be the good consequences of the belt tightening,” he said.
Instead, the governor threw shot after shot at public higher education. His plan is full of austerity, pain and severity, and contains no acknowledgment of the role California higher education has played in dealing with past crises, Zingg said. Brown failed to describe purpose in the pain or instill hope, continued Zingg, ever the historian, who referenced President Abraham Lincoln’s famous Second Inaugural Address.

The campus’ chief called Brown’s plan a missed opportunity.

“Folks can take a lot … if you assure them a sense of purpose,” he said.

**Chico State’s share of the pain translates** into dollars and cents, of course. After factoring in the system-wide tuition increases of $221 million, the campus is looking at a $14 million loss in revenue. “It’s serious,” Zingg said of the figure.

The university will have to use some of its reserves, and CSU Chancellor Charles Reed has made it clear that all types of cost-saving measures, including additional fee hikes, furloughs, and layoffs, are on the table, Zingg said. (Furloughs from an earlier budget expired over the summer.)

He noted that Brown’s plan brings the CSU back to the funding levels experienced in 1999, when the system had 70,000 fewer students.

In a telephone conversation a few days earlier, Susan Green, a longtime Chico State history professor, pointed out that today’s CSU, though responsible for educating tens of thousands more students than a decade ago, is doing so with fewer faculty and staff members. Going back to that funding level is startling, she said.

“It’s an unprecedented cut, without a doubt,” she said.

Green, who is president of the Chico’s chapter of the California Faculty Association, was speaking from Los Angeles. She was there to meet with other officials from CFA, which represents more than 20,000 CSU faculty and non-faculty members. She noted that much is uncertain at this time.

The negotiations process for CFA’s latest contract took 18 months to resolve, and the agreement expired at the end of June. Green said there’s no telling how long it will take to renegotiate in this climate. She acknowledged that the timing is terrible, but quickly noted there’s room for improvement even during challenging times.

She also said the financial predicament will force the CSU and the state to have tough conversations about the future of higher education in California, and that
will be a good thing. What’s needed is a realistic vision for stable funding that’s not dependent on one-time fixes, such as federal stimulus dollars.

To that end, CFA is looking to help bring back Assembly Bill 656, the Fair Share for Fair Tuition bill, which would have generated an estimated $1 billion annually for the UC, CSU and community colleges by instituting a tax on oil extraction. Assemblyman Alberto Torrico (D-Fremont), now termed out, introduced the tax during the 2009-10 legislative session. The bill stalled in the Senate Education Committee and is now dead, but Green says it’s likely to come forward again.

Its goal is to provide public institutions of higher education with a dedicated stream of revenue. Green has been championing such a measure for several years, noting that California is the only state in the nation in which such a fee is not collected.

Meanwhile, Green has watched class sizes swell and fees skyrocket. In the fall, annual undergraduate fees will rise to $4,884 (not including other campus costs such as student-union fees). The increases are denying access to the children of residents who have been paying into the system for decades, she said.

“It’s not the people’s university anymore,” Green said.

**It could get worse.** Zingg warned that, because the governor’s proposal is contingent on voter approval of tax extensions, the $14 million in cuts Chico State faces could increase. He assured that he will continue to focus on protecting and supporting the campus’ workforce and managing resources.

He’s also spending a lot of time furthering a commitment to diversity. The early part of this week, he was scheduled for a trip to the Coachella Valley to talk to students in the low-income region surrounding the wealthy Palm Springs area. Students recruited from area high schools have had great success at Chico State, he said, and this year the campus expects more than 60 applicants from the region.

The outreach is part of the university’s Diversity Action Plan, which is launching this coming semester after 18 months in development. Zingg spoke enthusiastically about the plan and his trip to Southern California and the partnership that’s growing.

“In the midst of dreadful budgets, this is what you focus on,” he said.