California's higher education in line for big budget hit under Brown's proposals

By Laurel Rosenhall
lrosenhall@sacbee.com
Published: Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2011 - 12:00 am | Page 1A
Last Modified: Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2011 - 12:14 am

What a turnaround from last year.

While last budget season, California's public universities were the only major area of government to see an increase in state funding, higher education is now in line to take a big hit – 16 percent if Gov. Jerry Brown's budget proposal comes to pass.

Brown on Monday proposed cutting $500 million each from the University of California and the California State University systems and another $400 million from community colleges. The announcement came as no surprise to college leaders, who say the newly elected governor told them last month to brace for reductions.

Brown's proposal marks the starting point for months of negotiations. But it's already clear that the impact of any cuts on students, parents and college employees will vary among the three segments of California's higher education system.

Community colleges

To offset a portion of the cuts, Brown has proposed raising fees from $26 to $36 a unit, which means a full-time student would pay $1,080 per school year starting this fall – a 38 percent rise.

Community college leaders have historically opposed increasing fees for students at the state's 112 campuses, but response to Brown's proposal this week was muted.

"Reality has set in," said Terri Carbaugh, spokeswoman for the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

"For years we were fighting to be a free institution where you could just walk on and go to class. But our state budget just won't support that. And we're hearing from our own students: 'I will pay a little more if I could just get my math class and move on and get my degree.' "

Community college leaders aren't yet committing to how large an increase they will support, Carbaugh said, but they're open to the idea of raising fees.
It's a suggestion the state's nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office has been pushing for years, arguing that higher fees would bring more money to the colleges without hurting poor and middle-income students.

Students from families that earn up to $65,000 a year qualify for waivers and don't pay any fees. Students from families earning up to $160,000 will get a full refund on their fees through federal tax credits, said Steve Boilard, the LAO's director of higher education.

"Our argument is: (The state's) just leaving this federal money on the table," Boilard said.

California State University

The higher-ed budget roller coaster is likely to have an impact on enrollment at the 23 CSU campuses and could leave students facing a real squeeze to get in next year.

Last school year, CSU responded to state budget cuts by slashing enrollment by 30,000 students, largely by shutting the doors on those who wanted to transfer. This school year, CSU got a funding bump – and admitted tens of thousands of new students to meet enrollment targets that came with the increase. But with the budget likely to go down again next year, enrollment could too.

"The big swings up and down year to year really complicate good management of a university," said Robert Turnage, CSU's assistant vice chancellor for budget.

Turnage said officials will have to consider lots of ways to save money next year – including cuts to the number of students they admit for fall 2011 and spring 2012.

CSU employees are also likely to feel the budget cuts, he said, though it's too soon to say whether that would be in the form of furloughs, layoffs, pay cuts or reduced benefits. But with benefits and payroll making up 85 percent of CSU's expenditures, Turnage said, "we have to reduce the amount we're spending on salaries and benefits."

University of California

The state's premier university system has been gradually reducing enrollment over a few years, but it never implemented the massive cuts – and additions – seen at CSU. Vast enrollment changes are unlikely at UC campuses next year, though the number of new freshmen may go down slightly, said Patrick Lenz, vice president for budget.

He said UC may also respond to its budget cut by admitting more undergraduates from outside California, who pay much higher tuition.

UC President Mark Yudof said he has asked UC's 10 chancellors to come back with plans by March 1 on how they will reduce budgets on their campuses. He said he's reluctant to raise tuition or reduce financial aid but can't make any promises until he's assessed the proposals.
"The physics of the situation cannot be denied," Yudof said. "As the core budget shrinks, so must the university."

UC Santa Cruz student Claudia Magaña said she's already seen the impact of earlier cuts. One of her classes of 350 students used to have six teaching assistants, she said, and now has three. That's left each TA with so many papers to grade that the professor no longer assigns essays as homework. Instead, students do brief in-class writing assignments, Magaña said.

Students are organizing their annual lobbying day at the state Capitol for the end of February, Magaña said, as well as planning campus protests in March.

"Right now everyone is trying to understand what the budget means," she said. "And if there's any chance of fighting it."