Chico State wilderness program in jeopardy

By LARRY MITCHELL-Staff Writer
Posted: 08/05/2012 02:01:05 AM PDT

CHICO — A program that prepares Chico State University students for careers leading wilderness trips is threatened by campus budget cuts. Students who major in outdoor education study the environment and leadership skills. They also learn to backpack, rock climb, camp in the snow and lead groups on white-water canoe trips.

According to its coordinator, Professor Reid Cross, Chico State's Outdoor Education program is among the nation's best in a growing field.

Because of the university's budget problems, however, the Chico State program has been put on suspension. For the time being, no new students are being admitted to it.

Cross said Outdoor Education has been unfairly targeted because it's new, still a small program and is relatively expensive.

Chico State has had courses like backpacking and skiing since the 1970s, but they were just electives students could choose, Cross said.

In the late 1980s, the courses were given some organization so students who took a certain number could earn a certificate in outdoor education.

In 2000, some faculty members in the Department of Kinesiology proposed creating a major in outdoor education.

Cross, an experienced backpacker and mountain climber who had been teaching outdoor education at Northern Colorado University, said he was hired in 2001 to help start the program at Chico State. The Academic Senate voted for the program and the campus president approved it, Cross said.

Outdoor Education, as a degree program, got off the ground in the fall of 2011, with 18 majors. By the end of the year, 36 students were majoring in the subject, he said.

Cross said Chico State's program is among the best in the country partly because of how much time its students are in the outdoors.
The program includes an "immersion class," in which students spend most of a semester in the wilderness.

Cross said this class begins with full days of classroom instruction. Then students spend 18 days camping during the winter in the California mountains. Then they return to Chico for more classes.

Next they go to Utah for a rock-climbing camp, a 35-day backpacking trip and 10 days of white-water canoeing. In addition, they do service projects for the Bureau of Land Management, Cross said.

Toward the end of the last school year, leaders of the Department of Kinesiology and the dean of the College of Communication and Education suspended new admissions to the program, Cross said.

When admissions to a program are suspended, the university takes time to decide if the program should be changed and continued or discontinued. Cross acknowledged his program is more expensive than others. That's because outdoor-education instructors spend a lot of time with a relatively small number of students.

However, he said, the department and college calculated costs in a way that made it appear Outdoor Education cost nearly twice as much as the department's second-most expensive program, which is coaching. It put the annual cost of instruction at $93,750 for outdoor education and $52,200 for coaching. Cross said when at his request a mathematician reworked the figures, there wasn't as big a difference. That analysis put outdoor education at $137,505 and coaching at $134,415.

While outdoor education has 36 majors, Cross estimated coaching has 200 to 270 majors.

He is unhappy the decision to suspend admissions was made from above without sufficient involvement of faculty. He also said it's unfair that while juniors and seniors in the program are being allowed to complete their majors, freshmen and sophomores were told they couldn't.

Maggie Payne, interim dean of the College of Communication and Education, said suspending admissions was "kind of a heartrending thing to do." But it was necessary, in view of a severe funding shortfall that's expected to hit the State University system, she said. She said of outdoor education, "the cost that we're seeing is just many times greater per student than other programs in the same department." Payne said outdoor education's courses, units and costs grew faster than expected. "There was a desire to make the program bigger and better, to really make it a Cadillac program. Unfortunately, it was beyond our ability to afford," she said.

Last year, she said, many meetings were held, with faculty attending, about the budget and the viability of the outdoor education program. And she said freshmen and sophomores were told getting a degree in outdoor education was still an option for them although the program would have to be modified.
Payne said she hopes in the next year or so, ways can be found to make outdoor education affordable. One possibility, she said, might be to join forces with other CSU campuses for certain parts of the program, like the immersion class.

Cross said he hopes administrators are serious about finding a way to keep the outdoor education program going. "We know if we get to keep it, it won't look like what it looks like now, but we're OK with making compromises," he said.

Payne said the program has a lot of support. "It's a program people feel very passionate about," she said. "I have received so many emails from students and graduates who said this was a transformative program, that it changed them, building character and courage and all kinds of things like that."

*Staff writer Larry Mitchell can be reached at 896-7759, lmitchell@chicoer.com, or followed on Twitter @LarryMitchell7*