California College Counters Budget Cuts With Donor-Sponsored Classes

By Lee Gardner

_Las Positas College, a two-year institution, is soliciting private benefactors in the community to sponsor class sections at $5,500 each._

Cuts in state support have led administrators at Las Positas College to resort to a more-direct appeal for public dollars. The two-year institution in Livermore, Calif., announced on Thursday that it was soliciting private benefactors in the community to sponsor class sections at $5,500 each.

A new effort, dubbed Foundation 55, is designed to raise the number of sections lost to budget cuts over the past four years. The two-institution Chabot-Las Positas Community College District has seen its allotment from Sacramento drop from $118-million in 2008-9 to $90-million in 2012-13. Las Positas was forced to lower the number of sections open to students from 894 in the fall of 2008 to 793 in the fall of 2011, and it lost 13 more sections to additional cuts this past spring.

As a result, about 8,500 students at Las Positas, like students across the California Community College system, increasingly face long wait lists for core classes they may need to graduate or transfer.

Foundation 55 won’t make up for all the lost capacity overnight, but it will help replace the courses lost this spring, said the president of Las Positas, Kevin G. Walthers, "and we'll be able to build on that."

Students registering late for the fall semester may find themselves in one of six courses in English, speech, and mathematics being added to the schedule through Foundation 55 seed money. The nonprofit Las Positas College Foundation, which will administer the effort, donated $16,500. Scott Haggerty, a member of the Board of Supervisors for Alameda County, where Las Positas is located, contributed $11,000. Additional money has come into the program from grants and from fees for renting college property for public events.
Theodore J. Kaye, chief executive officer of the Las Positas College Foundation, said he hopes the effort will eventually provide for an additional 10 to 15 sections per semester. This is not the first time a college has tried to enlist community sponsors for individual class sections, and Mr. Kaye is sensitive to past controversies over donors who attempted to influence the beneficiaries of their largess.

"They can say, 'I'd really like to have something in the humanities,'" Mr. Kaye said, but donors will not be able to pick specific classes to subsidize or to influence the curriculum or enrollment. The classes will not bear donors' names, he added, and students who enroll in a new section will not know it is supported by Foundation 55, though donors will be acknowledged elsewhere as "very special friends of the college."

While the effort is intended to benefit the college and its students, Mr. Kaye said a better-educated work force will also benefit the local businesses he expects will be Foundation 55's primary donors. "People get that," he said of his discussions with local business leaders so far. "The math is peanuts."

Justin C. Garoupa, a professor of English at Las Positas, compared Foundation 55 to "Kickstarterer for community-college courses."

"It's good to see creative approaches being taken" to meet students' immediate needs, he said. At the same time, he added, like Kickstarter's spot low-level fund raising, the new effort is no substitute for what the college really needs: "sustainable and sustained funding."

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