

SAFE HARBOR

By Phil Smith

What a difference a semester makes. In February, Dean Murakami and I began visiting each college to discuss the state budget situation and its impact on our district. During the forums, Dean presented three possible budget futures for Los Rios. Even the most optimistic budget scenario—the one which assumed a June tax extension measure would make it to the ballot and be passed by voters—was pretty dismal. The other scenarios, although definitely discussed during the forums, were almost too horrific to contemplate seriously, and yet now, in April, we know for sure that there will be no such ballot measure in June. Instead, we now face either the middle-case or the worst-case budget scenario.

And what about next year? Will the state's budget situation and political gridlock have changed so much that our local budget situation will improve dramatically? Much like the weather, it's hard to forecast the multi-

year economic climate precisely but the larger pattern of budgetary forces suggests that we can expect regular, and, at times, heavy "storms" over the next few years. The question before us is, how can the Los Rios colleges weather the challenges ahead, not just this year, but over the long term?

A focus for me over the last couple of years is how to effectively plan for and make reductions to our class sections and programs. When we experience a series of ongoing budgetary "storms," the amount that we need to cut becomes a moving target. Indeed, we've just experienced this situation this past semester, with departments asked to cut progressively higher percentages from summer, fall, and spring schedules as the semester wore on. This "death by a thousand cuts" maximizes employee anxiety as the process of accommodating new budget reductions seems never ending. Just when we

think the worst is over and have adjusted to the new reality, we must begin tightening and eliminating again. This cycle of “decide, cut, adjust, repeat” is particularly dangerous in terms of morale. Faculty and managers begin to experience “cut fatigue”; important decisions about what to keep and what to let go are made at our lowest emotional points; and our ability to think strategically and long-term is hampered.

Is there a way to break out of this stress cycle? That is, is there a way to plan for class section and program reductions over a multi-year period in such a way that faculty and students can select classes and arrange their schedules with a reasonable degree of security? I believe the answer is yes, but it involves an important psychological shift in how we view class section reductions. Instead of focusing on budget cuts, we must focus on budget keeps. It’s a triage model in which we first identify the absolute core that is necessary to maintain the functionality of the college over a long period of time, making a firm commitment to preserve that core at all costs. It is the designation of an essential core and the institution’s determination to maintain it that provides a “safe harbor” from which faculty and students can choose class schedules with relatively solid assurance that classes are not going to be cancelled at the last minute.

How does a college identify its curricular center? Selecting what class sections to keep requires the employment of a core value or criterion that separates what is crucial from what is not. Fortunately for us, Los Rios has already made a core commitment that can be used for this purpose: no layoffs of full-time employees. To accomplish this commitment, Los Rios colleges must ensure that each department allocates enough FTE to cover the teaching loads of its full-time faculty members. All other departmental class offerings, those that could be taught as overloads or by adjuncts, would have the potential to be cut.

The core value helps us calculate how many class sections are needed to maintain a full-time faculty, but it doesn’t tell us which class sections to keep. Additional criteria must be used such as prioritizing those classes most needed by students to complete degrees and certificates, to transfer, and to maintain job skills. For this reason, it makes sense to ask departments to prioritize all of their class offerings from the most to the least essential according to criteria that would allow the college

to achieve its mission. Once priorities have been established, departments can identify their core offerings by going down their respective priority lists until enough FTE has been assigned to ensure teaching loads for its full-time faculty.

Anticipating additional cuts in the future, some Los Rios department chairs and deans have implemented a version of the procedure above, planning for much higher percentage cuts, closer to the worst-case scenario. Identifying a safe harbor for their department’s faculty provides some important benefits. Full-timers know that, if they build their future schedules from the department’s essential core, their schedules are safe. They may not be able to build their ideal schedule from those offerings, but they won’t be subject to last minute cuts and changes either. And because the department has taken the time to prioritize all of its offerings, including the ones that could possibly be cut, adjunct faculty and faculty seeking overload assignments are able to get a sense of those class sections that are relatively safe (e.g., high on the priority list) and those that have a greater probability of being eliminated (e.g., those lower on the department’s priority list).

If departments across the Los Rios colleges were all of the same size and there were an institutional commitment to reduce class offerings proportionally across them, then a decentralized approach in which each department identifies its essential core might be sufficient in helping us weather a long-term budgetary contraction. But departments are not the same size. It is a simple fact that different departments have different numbers of full-time faculty. Thus, at a certain point, our commitment of not laying off full-time employees means that some departments’ section offerings must be cut more than others so as not to reduce other departments below the level needed to maintain teaching loads for their full-timers.

There are two main approaches for making disproportionate cuts at the college level. The first is a top-down approach in which a small group decides the different percentages by which departments will be cut. Departments are then informed of their percentages and expected to implement them locally. Ideally, the small group would take into account the college’s overall mission and priorities when deciding the various disproportionate reductions to departments. Unfortunately, this approach pits departments against one another in a very crude

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way. What possible data could the small group use to decide a priori which departments should be cut more than others? The tendency would be to make decisions based upon general beliefs about how the various departments contribute to student success. This approach would reflect college priorities in only the roughest of ways.

The second approach starts with each department's priorities and looks at the problem from the bottom up. Rather than keeping each department's priorities separate in its own silo, colleges compile a master list consisting of all class sections across the entire institution that could be potentially cut (i.e., those class sections not needed to maintain full-time teaching loads in the departments). Now it is the job of a small group to order this master list according to the college's priorities. Rather than pitting an entire department's offerings against another department's as in the top-down procedure, this approach allows individual class sections to be weighed against other individual class sections. When the grain size of analysis is at the course rather than the department level, class sections can be compared across a variety of dimensions. For example, the small group could look at whether a class is part of a degree, certificate, or general education pattern; historical enrollment patterns can be analyzed; and the department's priority rankings of individual class sections can also be counted.

A college-wide priority list developed under the bottom-up approach described above would provide a complete, detailed roadmap that faculty and deans could rely on over a multi-year period to make educated choices about schedules. Class sections with the highest college priority would be much less likely to be cut than those classes with the lowest priority. Because they would be able to reasonably ascertain the risks associated with particular schedules, faculty and others could begin making proactive, strategic decisions during the budgetary storm rather than reacting to the latest crisis.

The dictionary defines a "safe harbor" as a harbor or haven which provides safety from unfavorable weather, attack, or other negative circumstances. It's hard to think of a more negative circumstance for Los Rios than an ongoing, multi-year budget contraction. A comprehensive prioritization of all of our class section offerings provides a mechanism for Los Rios to construct its own safe harbor during this series of budgetary storms.

Phil Smith is completing the second year of his term as District Academic Senate President. The views expressed in this article, however, are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the District Academic Senate or any of the college academic senates. ■