



UNION NEWS

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PREPARING FOR SECTION CUTS

By Phil Smith, Ph.D.

During flex, I attended a presentation by ARC Police Captain Chris Day about how to respond to an active shooter on campus. We watched an engaging video with gun shots (we learned that real gun shots don't sound as dramatic as they do on TV and film!), real college classrooms, and actors portraying students and professors responding (or not responding) to various situations and scenarios connected with an active shooter on campus.

Perhaps the biggest tip I took from the video and the presentation was that of developing a "survivor mentality." Basically, the video warned us about the dangers of denial ("Those aren't really gun shots; it's just something else.") and panic ("Not to freeze in fear" and "Not to make rash, nonstrategic decisions.") I was so inspired by Captain Day's presentation that I added a section on Safety to my syllabus. Then I spent about five minutes the first day getting student volunteers to put the district emergency number ("558-5551") in their cell phones, discussing ways we could barricade the door if necessary, and talking about strategies for disrupting the shooter's ability to target us. I wanted students to have a sense that we would be proactive in the face of danger, that we would be survivors not victims.

As you know, the current state budget situation for community colleges is grim, and, although dealing with budget cuts is not as immediate, dire, and life-threatening as having to deal with an active shooter on campus, budget cuts do challenge our livelihoods and

the way we operate as an educational institution. The articles in this newsletter detail some of the very hard financial choices that we are facing within Los Rios. As both an institution and as individuals, we will experience painful cuts and losses in the coming months. My goal in this article is to highlight the need for a "survivor mentality" to get through these lean times, especially in the major impact area of class section cuts.

With the exception of the last two years, the norm in Los Rios has been to grow, to serve more students, to add more classes. To support that growth, certain procedures and norms of practice have become institutionalized. Now we are faced with a changing economic situation in which we must reduce our offerings. Given this different set of circumstances, are our existing procedures for adding classes during times of growth appropriate for cutting class sections in times of budget contraction?

An analogy might be helpful. Perhaps you are lucky enough not to have this problem, but, for me, it's easier to gain weight than to lose it. If food is readily available, it doesn't take much effort for me to gain a few pounds. Likewise, when Los Rios is in growth mode, it really doesn't take much effort to add classes. Without much trouble, deans can recruit a full-timer into taking another class as overload or find an adjunct professor who is willing to teach one more class. In general, it's not too difficult to find rooms or space for additional classes. Furthermore, a college's growth can

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be highly decentralized: individual departments can choose if they want to grow, and to what extent. And, with only minor inconveniences, classes can be added at the last minute in response to student demand.

Although there may be skirmishes about how resources are allocated and disagreements about which departments should grow and which shouldn't, the overall intensity of conflicts is somewhat muted because we aren't playing a zero-sum game when we are all growing. There aren't winners and losers because, well, everyone is winning.

But Los Rios is not in growth mode and probably won't be for a while. We will not be adding class sections; we will be cutting them. To preserve core functions and maximize incoming funds, there will be disproportionate cuts, with some colleges and some departments hit harder than others. This is and will be challenging and exacting work.

It is tempting to put off thinking and planning for class section cuts until the budget situation becomes clearer: "Let's not worry about what needs to be cut until we are absolutely sure of the numbers." Although this type of last minute, on-the-fly adjustment of class offer-

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ings may have worked in growth times, even been advantageous, the uncertainty of waiting until the cuts are made actually increases anxiety. Virtually everyone feels at risk, and it is almost impossible for anyone to prepare emotionally or financially for the cuts to come.

Research in disaster preparedness tells us that survival is more likely and injuries are reduced when institutions have specific and detailed plans to address disasters before they happen. After thinking about all our options, talking with faculty and administrative colleagues, researching what other institutions and companies do, I'd like to suggest that it may be in our collective best interest for Los Rios colleges to develop specific, college-wide lists of potential class section cuts.

It's important to be clear about what a class section reduction plan would look like. In this case, a plan would be a published list of specific class sections that we currently offer but which we would no longer schedule if certain budgetary situations kick in. A section cutting plan is not a statement about how we will cut at some point in the future: "At the time of a budget reduction, the department chairs and the deans will identify class section cuts according to the percentages given them by the Vice President, and then the Dean's Council will decide which classes to cut from the schedule." This approach is a reactive response, waiting until the crisis occurs to act. Nor is a plan a list of criteria that will be used to decide which class sections to keep or eliminate: "Core classes that fulfill the AA/AS GE requirement will not be eliminated from the schedule." This approach confuses the means with the end. Granted, we will use criteria to identify which specific sections to keep or cut, but the criteria are part of the method for producing the plan, not the plan itself. The plan is the published list of potential class section cuts.

Why recommend that the plan be published and disseminated to all faculty? Developing a survivor mentality for class cuts requires as many people who could possibly be impacted by the event know about it in advance. This way, we begin to minimize damage before the event occurs. Knowing which class sections are potentially on the chopping block allows employees and others to begin rearranging their schedules and other aspects of their lives to minimize the fallout from class cuts. And, although it seems somewhat counterintuitive, a published list actually gives us more flexibility if unforeseen circumstances arise. We simply compare the unexpected development with how we had planned to respond, and then modify the previously planned course of action instead of having to create a totally new one.

Perhaps the most challenging question would be, how should this plan be created? Those of you that have been in meetings with me know that I'm fond of saying Perfection is the Enemy of the Good. And I believe that that is true about the development of college-wide section reduction plans as well. No process for developing such a plan will be perfect, but it is possible to develop a method that is consistent with Los Rios' values of integrity, transparency, and shared decision-making. The Academic Senate has taken a stab at developing such a process: department faculty and deans at a college would work together to prioritize all of their

class offerings from the most necessary to the least and then those lists would be merged into single college-wide priority lists, the bottom tiers of which would form the college's list of potential cuts. (I don't have the space to describe the method in detail in this article, but for those who are interested, please visit: http://inside.losrios.edu/~intranet/class_section_plans.html) But this is just one procedure for developing the list, and there may be other methods consistent with our values. Regardless of how the final section reduction plan is generated, the benefits of having a published list of class sections from which to eliminate in a financial emergency far outweigh any institutional costs incurred in creating such a plan.

It is my hope that we be proactive survivors of the challenging budgetary times ahead. There will be class section cuts in Los Rios. What is unknown at this point is how deep these cuts may be. While it is human to have the emotions of denial, fear, and anger under such circumstances, the best defense against an uncertain future is a strong, robust, and thoughtful offense. A detailed list of class sections that could be cut under specific financial conditions would be a significant and major way to prepare for the unexpected. ■

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, any of the college academic senates, or the LRCFT.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH INSTITUTE, SACRAMENTO CHAPTER SEEKS NEW MEMBERS

The Sacramento Chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI) is looking for a few good men and women union members who want to fight for racial equality and economic justice.

APRI, a non-partisan organization, was founded in 1965 as a national organization of African American trade unionists. Its mission since then has been to fight for economic and social equality for African Americans, whether they are union members or not, working or not. APRI is involved in voter registration drives, organizing non-partisan get-out-the-vote drives and voter education. APRI members play a crucial role in supporting the labor movement's educational and organizing campaigns and grassroots organizing efforts. To accomplish this, APRI builds alliances with civic, religious, civil rights and youth groups.

If you'd like to learn more about becoming a member of APRI, please call Robert Perrone at the Union office: 916- 448-2452.