

Clark College may evade deeper cuts

Official optimistic that increased enrollment, tuition hikes will plug gap

By **HOWARD BUCK**
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Clark College just might emerge relatively unscathed from state budget reductions that have hit Washington's public universities and K-12 school districts.

For that, the community college has its students — and their pocketbooks — to thank.

Near-record student enrollment during an anemic economy, combined with back-to-back 7 percent tuition hikes approved by state legislators, could eliminate the need for additional staffing or program cuts, cautious officials say.

"They're enough. There's reason to be optimistic," said Bob Williamson, Clark's vice president of administrative services.

The state budget adopted in Olympia last week cuts state contributions to community and trade school budgets by about 10.7 percent for the 2009-11 cycle. That comes to about \$2.2 million less for Clark's base-level state funding.

Lawmakers sided with Gov. Chris Gregoire in sheltering community colleges, seen as critical job-training engines, from greater reductions.

Good news is, the school already trimmed spending by 4.3 percent in February, saving about \$1.36 million per year.

Clark curbed office and travel spending, placed a hiring freeze on several open staff positions and asked instructors to take on more students in classrooms.

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HIGHER COSTS

■ **Tuition:** For a full-year, full-time Clark College student, a 7 percent tuition increase will mean paying \$6 more per credit; \$90 for a 15-credit term; \$270 total for three quarters.

■ **Technology fee:** A proposed 50 percent technology fee increase would cost an additional \$1 per credit. Full-timers would pay \$15 more per quarter or \$45 more per year.

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The state-adopted 7 percent tuition increase won't directly plug the 6 percent funding gap that remains. But it's close enough, teamed with some fee increases and modest belt-tightening, to dodge more painful reductions — at least for now.

As a result, there are now no budget-driven layoffs in sight, Williamson told Clark trustees last week.

Clark has seen enrollment explode in the past 12 months. For the current quarter, student head count has jumped to 13,270. That's up 14 percent from spring 2008.

Sharpening the spike is record Running Start enrollment of 1,313 (up 31 percent), among the state's largest. Running Start allows high school students to earn tuition-free credits while Clark receives prorated state funding.

"I think we got through this as well as any college in the state," Clark President Bob Knight said, after the stressful legislative session concluded. "No other college has two numbers that big."

There are some risks. The state's economy could weaken further, triggering another round of funding cuts. Conversely, if the job market improves, Williamson expects the current "excess enrollment" to swiftly drop again to normal levels.

"The revenue we're generating from enrollment is 'soft dollars.' It will dip," Williamson predicted. When it does, further changes will be needed.

Already, Clark leaders want to raise a \$2 per credit technology fee most students pay to \$3 per credit. Tech fee collections have flattened even while campus technology costs and demands climb, they say. If approved by a vote of the student body, the fee increase would be the first since it was enacted in 1999.

Also, Williamson has gathered 22 pages of potential cost savings suggested by Clark faculty members, other employees, students and others, by e-mail and during recent campus budget forums.

Several cost efficiencies might be enacted, even without new budget pressures, he said.