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GCC grapples with flat enrollment in past year

School turns new focus on increasing student population from high schools.

By Kelly Corrigan

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As Glendale Community College officials gear up for a new academic year in the fall, they are hoping for a boost in enrollment after figures for the past academic year were relatively flat.

Overall, officials are estimating a 0.6% decrease for the 2014-15 academic year.

Student enrollment, which college officials have been tracking monthly, became a hot topic again earlier this month when trustees met during a regular board meeting.

"We've seen the writing on the wall. We've seen how adjacent colleges are growing, whether it's because of an increase in population or services, it really doesn't matter," said trustee Vahe Peroomian, who urged officials to place it as their top priority.

He went on to say that while the college "happens to be the plan B" for many students, it becomes the top choice for many high school seniors because four-year universities are turning students away when they become inundated.

"Why aren't we doing a better job about making them feel better about coming here so we can capture them?" he asked.

Increases and decreases in enrollment vary with each session. According to the latest enrollment report, the college saw a 13% boost during the 2014-15 winter session compared to the previous academic year, while there was a 4.8% decline in fall numbers in 2014-15 compared to the year prior.

Now, officials project a 3.4% drop in the number of full-time equivalent students who enrolled this past spring, which includes a combination of full-time and part-time students.

Academic Senate President Andy Young, who is also an associate math professor, recalled when his calculus class would fill to its capacity at 40 students, with 25 more names on a waiting list and another 20 who'd show up on the first day of his class, hoping to secure a seat.

That was back in 2010, 2011 and 2012, when Young said the college was experiencing an enrollment peak, which coincided with an economy working through the recession, and the college experiencing long waiting lists, budget cuts and class reductions.

"As the economy improves, more people go back to work and are less concerned about improving their skills. That's a good thing the economy is improving. There's no way we want to discourage that," Young said.

"I don't see it as a crisis. I see it as a challenge," he added.

Because the college is dependent on enrollment to receive state funds, it risks taking a blow to its budget if growth does not occur.

A 2% enrollment boost next year would have the college gain about 300 full-time equivalent students and \$1.4 million in revenue, according to Ron Nakasone, executive vice president of administrative services.

College officials are expected to discuss how they can increase enrollment numbers during a retreat later this month, and they are expected to ponder whether they are offering the right types of classes, Nakasone said, adding that they'll also consider the timing of when classes are offered and whether the college needs to improve its marketing plan.

Young said educators are also examining how they can improve services tailored to students' needs, whether their aim is to improve language skills or transfer to a four-year school.

"We're trying to make it less likely that they would choose to leave," Young said. "Whatever the student goal is, we're working hard to make that happen."