

Necessary Cuts or a ‘Downward Spiral’?

Faculty members at the Peralta Community College District mourn hundreds of cut courses and laid-off adjuncts. Administrators say enrollment declines leave them no choice.

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By Sara Weissman May 10, 2022

Michelle Gallaga, a second-year student at Berkeley City College, was hoping to take a sociology of gender course this coming fall, but when she went to register, she found out the class was no longer being offered. She hopes to transfer to the University of California, Berkeley, to major in gender and women’s studies, but with related coursework unavailable at the community college, she worries it may not be an option.

“It doesn’t allow me to consider gender and women’s studies even though I’m leaning more toward that now,” she said. “It’s kind of limiting.”

Gallaga shared her disappointment at a Peralta Community College District Board of Trustees meeting last week. The district, which includes Berkeley City College, has cut hundreds of course sections in the last two years because of enrollment declines. Data provided by the district show 294 course sections cut since fall 2020.

I love my community college,” Gallaga said, adding that administrators should do everything they can to keep the community college the way it is “and not cut the classes or take away the teachers, especially the good teachers. That’s really why I wanted to speak up. It would be a pity.”

Jennifer Shanoski, president of the Peralta Federation of Teachers, the union representing district professors, said students are complaining they can’t get the courses they want, and adjuncts are fearful about their job security. She estimates that about 250 adjunct instructors have lost their jobs because they were no longer needed to teach courses cut since the 2019–20 academic year. She said sometimes classes are canceled a week before they’re scheduled to begin, leaving adjunct professors without work and little time to find new positions at other colleges.

“I feel like I get a call or two of crying people every week,” she said. She worries the district is in a “downward spiral,” where professors get cut because there aren’t enough students, which limits students’ course options, frustrates them and risks the district losing more students.

“It’s like this self-propagating problem,” she said. “I fully expect they will cut us again next year.”

Jannett Jackson, interim chancellor at the district, said strategically cutting courses that enroll fewer than 25 students is an unfortunate but necessary step to shore up the district’s financial health amid enrollment declines. Of the 56 course sections cut this

term, there were just three students registered per class on average, and 53 percent of the sections had no students registered.

Enrollment has been falling at the district's four colleges since 2016, and over time, that's left the district with more instructors than needed for the size of the student body, she said. The pandemic also took a toll on enrollment, much as it did at community colleges nationwide. Student head count fell to 27,886 this year compared to 35,689 in the 2019–20 academic year, a decrease of more than 20 percent, according to data from the district.

Jackson, a former part-time instructor, said she empathizes with adjuncts who relied on their teaching income, but cutting course sections and adjuncts allows full-time faculty members to maintain full course loads and makes for a leaner budget to stave off any possible future layoffs among full-time faculty members.

"That is not something I want to ever put this district through," she said. "I could just sit in this seat and say, 'Well, hell ... I'm just going to let somebody else worry about it. I'll be gone in a year.' That's never been the way I work. I believe in taking the hard right over the easy wrong."

The district has had its share of turmoil and financial troubles in recent years. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges put the colleges on probation in January 2020 after scrutinizing their finances. The colleges made improvements and were moved to "warning" status as of January 2022. An Alameda County civil grand jury report also slammed the district board last year for infighting and poor shared governance practices, among other issues.

These controversies followed a 2019 audit of the district by the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, an agency that helps California public K-12 schools and colleges manage their finances. The audit highlighted "serious concerns about the district's fiscal condition" and made 70 recommendations, including working to "align full-time faculty with district enrollment" and decrease the number of administrators.

"I think we can turn it around," Jackson said. "I know the odds are not in our favor, but that has never stopped us. I believe in the success of the human spirit. I believe that challenges are there for a reason. I think it should bring us together, not further apart, so we can champion the cause on behalf of our students, because they need us now more than ever."

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Shanoski argued that the district isn't as financially pressed as it once was—Peralta had a budget surplus this academic year after receiving state and federal COVID-19 relief funding. She also noted that the district has continued to hire administrators, including a

new deputy chancellor, this year. She believes that money would be better spent on keeping instructors, embracing smaller class sizes and having more options available to students.

“The money is there,” she said. “They’re just deciding to spend it on other things.”

Jackson said district leaders are working to make sure the district has the appropriate number of administrators, and some salaries are partially covered by grants and bonds. She also fears the district will soon lose funding. Starting in 2024, community colleges in California will receive state funding based on a new funding formula that factors in college completion rates and other student success metrics alongside enrollment. The enforcement of the formula, initially enacted in 2018, has been delayed because of widespread anxiety, and other concerns, among community college leaders in the state about impending funding losses if enrollment continues to decline and affects student outcomes. Meanwhile, Jackson worries about one-time COVID-19 relief funds running out and believes the district should save for the future. She said a projection of the district’s finances shows costs are expected to outpace revenue by the 2026–27 fiscal year if nothing changes.

I feel like a squirrel sometimes, with my cheeks full,” she said. “We’re planning for the winter.”

The cuts to courses and adjuncts at Peralta mirror trends at community colleges across the country as they suffered steep enrollment declines during the pandemic, said Glenn Colby, senior research officer at the American Association of University Professors.

Among community colleges nationally, the number of part-time contingent faculty members fell from 187,520 in fall 2019 to 165,322 in fall 2020, a decrease of 11.8 percent, according to data from the AAUP. Meanwhile, U.S. Department of Education data show the number of part-time faculty members in the California Community Colleges system dropped from 27,094 to 24,298 between fall 2019 and fall 2020, a loss of almost 2,800 instructors.

“Anecdotally, when I talk with community colleges around the country and districts and so forth, they tell me the contingent faculty are really being hammered the last couple years,” Colby said. Adjuncts already wrestle with job uncertainty every term, but especially when there are enrollment declines.

“Does the department chair give me a phone call for the next term, and say, ‘Hey, do you want to teach that class again?’ or does the phone just not ring?” he added. “It’s horrible if that’s your livelihood.”

Colby said higher ed experts, himself included, are concerned about faculty morale amid these challenges.

“People are burned out after two years of just being in constant crisis mode, putting out one fire after another,” he said. They’ve had to “take on extra workloads,” including

covering for laid-off colleagues on committees and running academic programs with fewer people.

Shanoski said the cuts have taken an emotional toll on the remaining instructors, and that stress and anxiety are palpable to students in their classes.

“Faculty morale is, I think, lower than I’ve ever seen it,” she said.

She also said she isn’t fully convinced full-time faculty members will ultimately be spared from cuts. She pointed to professors at City College of San Francisco, who camped out on campus last week to protest the expected layoffs of full-time faculty members.

“You just have to look across the Bay to see what’s coming,” she said.