VIEWPOINT: State budget cuts prompt Northland changes

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By: Anne Temte, Thief River Falls

THIEF RIVER FALLS — Because of recent concerns related to the Cosmetology Program at Northland Community and Technical College, it is time I share with Herald readers the heightened challenges the college is facing.

For anyone who is in tune with the severe budget deficit of the state of Minnesota, it will come as no surprise that Northland, a publicly funded institution, also is suffering from resource reduction.

The college has two sources of revenue: state allocation funds and tuition. In the past few years, Northland has lost nearly $3 million in allocation from the state. For the next fiscal year, the college has been directed to prepare for an allocation reduction that could be as much as $1 million.

These reductions are directly tied to the governor's action to unallot $50 million from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system in the aftermath of the 2009 legislative session. The December budget forecast for the state indicates that this unallotment may be increased to as much as $75 million.

In regard to tuition, the Legislature and the MnSCU board of trustees have limited tuition increases. The college has worked hard to limit tuition growth even below those limits to ensure a tuition rate in line with other MnSCU institutions.

At the same time, we are serving almost 300 more students than last year. These students all need the support services that help them with developing academic schedules, registration, financial aid, tutoring and so on.

Although we would like to sustain every program, activity and service that the residents of northwestern Minnesota have enjoyed from Northland, we simply cannot afford to continue doing everything that we always have done. We have worked hard to develop processes that let the college make rational decisions about what to sustain, what to strengthen and what we must, finally, let go.

Through collaboration with faculty leadership three years ago, the college administration developed a “sustainability process.” All academic programs at the college are measured annually against six indicators of health. Among these indicators are enrollment, student retention, student completion, cost of the program relative to income and cost of the program relative to similar programs throughout the MnSCU system.

This analysis has let the college assign programs to a “green” category if they are healthy in five or six of the measures. If they are healthy in three or four measures, they are in the “yellow” category, indicating that they need improvement. If they are healthy in two or fewer measures, programs are assigned to the “orange” category, indicating that they are in danger of being discontinued without substantial improvement.

Programs in the “yellow” and “orange” categories have worked with “sustainability” teams including recruitment and marketing specialists to increase awareness of and enrollment in programs. Deans have worked with program faculty to devise strategies to reduce program costs.

The Cosmetology Program has been in the “orange” category for three years. It has been the subject of the sustainability efforts mentioned above. Although the faculty and college recruiters tried many novel approaches to increasing enrollment, the costs of the program still are too much to be sustainable in these financially fragile times.

The attachment that individuals have to Northland and its programs is deeply appreciated. I recognize that rational arguments do not necessarily satisfy the emotional reaction people have to the closing of programs at public colleges. However, the campus and the college are strengthened when we make hard decisions that maintain the financial viability of the college.

Financial stability will guarantee Northland’s future, and I am committed to assuring that the college is financially stable, even in difficult times. We have worked hard in the past couple of years to develop a strategic plan that guides our decisions. That plan has been in play as we have made reductions in some areas and strategic investments in others.

Please continue to watch as Northland Community and Technical College contributes to the economic development of our region and to the career and educational development of our students.

Temte is president of Northland Community and Technical College.

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