

College crisis exaggerated?

The crisis over funding cuts for North Carolina's community colleges and technical institutes has been blown far out of proportion, according to sources within the community college system.

The 1977 General Assembly cut funds for the 57 schools by some \$3 million — a step which has produced complaints from some of the schools that they must eliminate programs, cut back on hiring, and trim plans for new offerings.

In several communities, the screws are being turned on legislators for making the cuts — an unfair assault, say the lawmakers.

Lt. Gov. James C. Green is so blunt as to call the whole exercise propaganda. Why, he was asked, are the college leaders so upset? Why are several communities getting so upset over what many believe were deep cuts in the budget?

"Because the press has been telling them the budget was cut . . . the truth has not been brought out," Green responds flatly.

Actually there are some campuses where the cuts have struck muscle — those with rapidly growing enrollment, but those are in the minority.

Here is how the situation came about. In the past, the system was funded on the basis of projected enrollment, with a formula in use to produce an over-all figure taking into account students who take only one or two courses or study in short-term extension programs. The over-all figure is called full-time equivalent totals — that is, it may take



**Bill
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six extension students to equal one full-time student.

Each year, the system projected enrollment for the next year and funds were allocated on the basis of expected enrollment. Some legislators suspected that those figures were being padded — whether deliberately so or not, the end result was the same.

This year's budget called for 114,000 FTE students, but legislators cut that back to 108,000 by basing the projection on actual enrollment last year of 108,178.

The result was a budget cut from \$130 million down to \$127 million. That would not have been drastic — except the total also had to cover the 6.5 percent pay raise, which pushed available money below the previous year's total.

Many of the schools complained loudly of the cuts — until enrollment time came around and they found that the schools are indeed seeing a sharp decline along the lines projected by the General Assembly.

The 108,000 enrollment figure was right; and top officials now admit that statewide the money situation is not at

all bad, and that only a few colleges where enrolment has climbed are hurting.

Plans are now being worked out to correct that imbalance. Many of the schools actually have a surplus now because of the enrollment decline, and that money will be collected back in Raleigh and redistributed to the campuses which are hurting.

As one college president now puts it, "The lack of funding at first got all the publicity . . . the fact that projected enrollment was cut to 108,000. It now develops that the figure was right, and in that respect we can't be critical of the Legislature.

"But where attention now is needed is that we are funded an inadequate

amount per enrollment . . . we simply don't receive sufficient money to operate the programs we should."

The push now is toward general increases in funding from the next session of the General Assembly.

And although most of the schools are not hurting this year, some definitely are. Central Piedmont in Charlotte lost about \$2 million while enrollment climbed 31 per cent over last year.

Gaston, Rowan, Catawba, and Caldwell counties have also reported conditions causing cutbacks. It is not known yet whether redistribution of the dollars can be done on a crash basis, or must await consideration by the General Assembly in May, 1978.

Reply from WPCC

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Gordon Blank, president of Western Piedmont Community College, was offered an opportunity to respond to today's Bill Noblitt column. Here are excerpts from his reply.)

By DR. GORDON BLANK
President, WPCC

Mr. Noblitt's assessment of the situation is an oversimplistic one. Part of the reason he and some others may have this view is that the budgeting formula is out of date and unnecessarily complicated.

The basic fact of legislative funding is that the technical institutes and community colleges receive insufficient money to provide the services and programs that the people of the state need and want.

The budgeting formula worked reasonably well in the formative stages of the community college system, but in its present form and with changed circumstances, it leads to misunderstandings and confusion. The defects have been recognized and state leaders are at work to remedy the deficiencies.

Faculties and staffs in the 57 community colleges and technical institutes are grateful for the salary-increase money provided by the Legislature, but the fact remains that they have extremely heavy teaching and work loads. According to a study completed last year, the average monthly salaries of faculty members in the North Carolina community college system rank near the bottom of both national and Southeast regional rankings.

Although some institutions in the system have sufficient funds to operate in an adequate fashion this year, many were severely hurt by the cutbacks because of the vagaries of the funding formula. Some of the institutions have found it necessary to release significant numbers of faculty and staff members and drastically cut back on programs and services.

At WPCC, we have been somewhat more fortunate and have been able to maintain a basic level of program offerings consistent with quality considerations. But, in order to do so, we have had to effect a number of highly restrictive economy measures.

Among these were not refilling some faculty vacancies, increasing work loads, curtailing low-enrollment courses, and heavily reducing material-supply and travel funds. Over-all, Western Piedmont received more money than last year, but taking out the funds which were legislatively mandated for salary increases, our operating budget was approximately 5 percent less than last year...

Our faculty and staff have done a superb job in rising to the challenge of continuing to provide a quality educational program, but their task is extremely difficult with the unduly reduced budget...

The people of North Carolina deserve no less than the best that the community college system can provide. But that best cannot be achieved unless the Legislature provides adequate funds to the system and the funds are distributed equitably.