

Budget-cutters, spare WPCC, say students

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MORGANTON — As North Carolina struggles with a budget crisis and decides what can be cut, community colleges may be the state's next target.

Western Piedmont Community College may be hit, and students are trying to do something about it.

Debra Heckman, a second-year student in the human services program, has spearheaded a letter-writing campaign that will swamp representatives, senators and North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley.

The North Carolina Community College System says the state has asked its 58 community colleges to plan for cuts of up to 10 percent. The state system says the cuts could

result in the loss of thousands of teacher positions, as well as the loss of courses.

Richard Greene, executive vice president of Western Piedmont, said a 10 percent cut would have a severe impact on the college.

"We could cut back on a lot of things at 4 percent and not lose too many classes," he said. "But if it's 10 percent, it would definitely affect some personnel. It depends on the severity of the cuts as to what we have to do."

In order to have the greatest impact on lawmakers, Heckman wrote a letter that she photocopied and, as of late last week, has 600 of the letters to send to the legislators.

On Wednesday and Thursday, Heckman set up a table at the annual Spring Fling

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on the WPCC campus and was gathering letters for bulk mailing to the governor, House Appropriations Committee member Ruth Easterling, Sen. Steve Metcalf, Sen. Charles Carter, Rep. Charles Buchanan and Rep. Walt Church.

The proposed cuts come at a time when many in Burke County have lost their jobs because of the downturn in the economy and many are looking to re-train for other jobs.

"There's a direct correlation between the economy and our enrollment. We are up 14 percent over last spring," Greene said.

Much of the gain is because of the returning students. But if the cuts go through, less money and increased enrollment would only compound the problem, Greene said.

Heckman said the college is supportive of her campaign, but it is not school-sponsored. Heckman has, though, announced it to the student government association and all school clubs.

"Articles in the papers prompted the action to want to put a voice out there," she said. "I knew just one voice wouldn't

when I went to the different clubs."

And Heckman is not doing it alone. She said the student government, legal club and the human services club have been helping with the campaign.

In the letter, which is drafted so it can be personalized, the student introduces himself or herself to the representative and tells what the student is majoring in at Western Piedmont.

The letter goes on to say that the proposed cuts would, "undermine our greatest priority — excellence in education."

The letter addresses the already overcrowded classrooms and the additional workload teachers have.

"Because of state funding, there are only so many programs offered at certain institutions. I had to drive from Hickory to be

in the program I want to be in," Heckman said during Spring Fling. "I'm already going to have to go to school one extra semester because of the availability of classes."

As to the costs of tuition, the letter says the recipient is the primary benefactor of education but there is a broader picture to advanced education.

"Education leads to increased wages, which increase the community tax base. Thus education benefits the community and the community should share costs," the letter says.

The letter ends by telling legislators that maintaining the level of education should be a priority and is signed by the person with the words taxpayer and voter below the name.

Tony Harlow, a nontraditional student, was enjoying Spring

Fling on Thursday at the college but he was eager to sign a letter. Harlow began attending the college after he was laid off from his job in the textile industry.

He thinks sending a message to legislators is important because, "There are going to be a lot of people who want to go to school and could really do well in school but they won't be able to go because of the cost and the cuts in classes."

Barbara Brown, student government association treasurer, said the economy is not only a problem for the governor but for individuals.

"This will only add to our hardship and to those already having a hard time getting their education," Brown said. "Education should be the last thing cut."