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SOU's board votes to cut faculty, majors

By Emma Maple of the Daily Courier

Southern Oregon University's Board of Trustees approved a slew of faculty, program and budget cuts on Thursday with a divided vote as SOU grapples with budget shortfalls.

The $10.7 million in budget savings across four years are partially achieved through eliminating 44 full-time equivalent faculty and staff positions and 22 majors and minors.

The university will now operate on a target annual budget of $60 million with 30 majors and 19 minors.

Some of the majors that were cut due to low enrollment or low regional relevance include chemistry and Spanish as well as math programs and gender, sexuality and women's studies, according to the plan.

SOU also eliminated its outdoor adventure and expedition leadership graduate program.

Seniors and juniors still will be able to graduate with their declared majors, SOU Executive Vice President and Provost Casey Shillam said, but sophomores and incoming freshmen may have to make changes as courses and programs phase out.

Even with the cuts, SOU President Rick Bailey said the university is predicting it will have a $600,000 deficit in four years in a worst-case scenario.

The plan "is not a panacea," Bailey said. "There are things we are going to have to do as an institution to continue to move forward."

The plan was approved Thursday 7-2, with board members Barry Thalden and Hala Schepmann voting no.

"The extent of these proposed cuts are too deep and devastating to the university," Thalden said. "Cutting expenses is not the solution, but is in fact a cause of the problem."

Schepmann said although it is clear that SOU had a budget challenge, the way the university chose to go about solving it "feels like the nuclear option."

The budget reductions were undertaken after the board asked the SOU administration to identify $5 million in savings for the current fiscal year, in response to deficits and an accounting error.

During the exercise, Bailey said he quickly realized cutting $5 million would be insufficient.

"Ultimately, we need to live within our means as an institution," Bailey said. "That's what makes this so challenging and so difficult."

The two biggest challenges the institution faces are low enrollment and student retention and insufficient state aid, according to the plan.

Bailey also said he's concerned about potential federal administration actions that would negatively impact higher education institutions.

Although the state has increased funding over the years, Bailey said it was nowhere near what was needed to account for rising costs.

"I don't think it's an exaggeration to say the landscape we're in right now is the most challenging landscape that the institution has faced in almost 100 years," Bailey said.

If cuts weren't made, the university would have to increase tuition by about 12%, Bailey added.

SOU's enrollment has declined by 29.3% in recent years and shows no sign of recovering. Its student retention rate over the last 20 years has hovered around 75%, according to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

An enrollment and retention plan is currently being developed, Bailey said.

Nationwide, not all universities are in the same boat. In the spring, public four-year universities saw a 2.5% enrollment increase when compared to the previous year, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's Current Term Enrollment Estimates Spring 2025 report.

In August, Rogue Community College said its enrollment has risen by 36% over the past few years. RCC said it consults with students, school districts and area businesses to develop in-demand programs.

Many of those programs focus on training people for specific careers — including in health care and the trades — that don't require four-year college degrees. Some students also take core classes at RCC at a lower cost, then transfer to universities.

To combat SOU's budget woes, the administration worked over the summer to cut $10 million to $12 million from its $71 million budget.

The provisional plan was presented to the board Aug. 1 and proposed reducing the university to 23 majors and 24 minors and axing 48 full-time equivalent positions.

Some majors, such as economics and creative writing, were added back after pushback from the community.

Many of the majors that escaped the chopping block will continue to be evaluated over the next few years or have low-enrollment classes cut, according to the plan.

Schepmann expressed concerns that some changes, including eliminating courses with low enrollment, could dumb-down degrees.

The 30 majors that SOU administration chose to retain focus on health sciences, arts, business, education and "other interdisciplinary programs aligned with regional workforce demands," according to the plan.

This year's sweeping budget cuts came just two years after SOU cut 13% of its workforce and $13 million in recurring costs as a result of identified budget shortfalls.

Over the last two years, SOU has changed almost 152 full-time equivalent positions through cuts, switching to alternative funding sources and reducing the length of its contracts.

"I'm not happy that we have to make this decision, frankly, because it's a difficult decision that is going to affect people," Board Chair Sheila Clough said. "I don't think there's anyone who can walk away from this being happy."

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