

CSU acknowledges Camp Fire effect

The system didn't cut funding to Chico State, despite significant enrollment drop

When it comes to ensuring there's enough money to pay faculty and staff, purchase equipment like microscopes and projectors, and keep the lights on in Chico State's classrooms, Debra Larson is your woman. As provost and vice president of Academic Affairs, she's hands-on.

"Because academics is our primary mission, and we are the biggest division on the campus, it requires us to have a stay-at-home parent," she said during a recent interview. "I work very closely with the faculty—my primary interface is with faculty and staff, and less so with students."

That may sound like she's removed from the student experience, but Larson's job is very much tied to that realm of campus. So although enrollment is not her department, when it drops—or rises—it affects her budget and can lead to difficult decisions like canceling classes. Take, for instance, the significant decrease in students attending the campus this school year. There were 515 fewer students enrolled in the fall semester than in 2018-19. What's more, each campus in the California State University system is expected to actually grow a certain amount every year. With funding tied to student bodies on campus, administrators were understandably nervous before budgets were released at the beginning of the school year that money would be tight.

"In the past, [the CSU] was very persnickety about meeting enrollment targets, in a really detailed way," Larson said. "[But] we did get some additional dollars. They are saying, 'We're going to give you 2 percent enrollment growth [funding] even if you didn't get that. That's partly because the CSU understands the impacts of the Camp Fire last year.'"

What this means is that the money that Chico State receives per student did not drop for 2019-20, despite the decline in enrollment. In essence, it got a pass. The economic impact 515 full-time-equivalent pupils would have on the campus is significant: \$3.82 million. That comes in the form of state dollars and tuition. Academic Affairs also received a one-time allotment of

\$1.1 million from the Graduation Initiative 2025 fund meant to help increase graduation rates across the CSU campuses. That money, Larson explained, plus the 2 percent growth dollars, offset any losses the campus would have felt due to lowered enrollment.

"The students aren't feeling it," she told the CN&R. She hasn't seen any class cancellations related to the drop, she said. While there are natural shifts each school year, many of them due to student interest in different majors, she said, the faculty shouldn't be feeling it either.

"They've received general salary increases over the past few years, funded by the Chancellor's Office," said Jennifer Mays, executive director of Budget and Academic Resources at Chico State. "And they are good salary increases."

One thing the campus does have its eye on, Larson said, is the drop in "nonresident" students, or those coming from out of state or even other countries. That number has been dropping the past few years, and therefore isn't a mere blip, she said. The significance of that decline for her department is that nonresident students bring in more money to the campus—they pay higher tuition, for instance. So, recruitment officers are looking at strategic ways to boost those numbers.

Recruitment—and retention—will be keys to getting over the Camp Fire hurdle, Larson said. And they're multifaceted.

"We're not anticipating that what happened this year with enrollment will foreshadow some change in our budget [for 2020-21]," Larson said. "What will impact our budget next year is, how are we doing in recruiting and retaining students?"

"And some of those are transfer students from Butte College. But Butte College enrollment is way down," Mays added, referring to the loss of 1,000 students since the Camp Fire at the community college. "So, there are all these different levers."

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Taking to the streets

A crowd of about 100 arrived at the City Plaza on Tuesday night (Dec. 17) calling for the impeachment of President Donald Trump. They carried signs with statements such as "Lock him up" and "Impeach and remove." A small group of Trump supporters showed up to counter-protest, and the two sides clashed with some heated discussion. It was part of a nationwide protest in anticipation of the House of Representatives voting for impeachment. PHOTO BY CHARLES FINLAY

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