

CAL STATE

Budget Ax Lops Off Entire Departments at San Diego

Higher education in California is facing a severe budget crisis, and no one knows it better than anthropologist Dan Whitney of San Diego State University. Whitney has the dubious distinction of being chairman of a department that will cease to exist come September: All 14 members of the anthropology department, including Whitney, received layoff notices in early June. They are not alone. A total of 193 of San Diego's 1016 tenured and tenure-track faculty members are slated to lose their jobs, nine of the campus's 72 departments will be shut down, and there will be deep cuts in others. Chemistry, for example, will lose 14 of its 23 faculty members.*

The layoffs and shutdowns at the San Diego campus—which are “virtually unprecedented in American higher education,” according to Jordan Kurland, associate general secretary for the American Association of University Professors—were ordered by San Diego State president Thomas Day. Day says they are the only way to save the campus. But faculty on both sides of the budget ax are accusing Day of a top-down management approach that Whitney, for one, characterizes as “budgetary martial law.” And they are incensed that most athletic programs are being spared while academic departments are being gored.

The cuts are being forced by a statewide fiscal crisis. In May, all 20 campuses of the California State University, as well as the nine campuses of the University of California (UC), were told to make plans for at least an 8% cut in state funds in the next academic year; the exact amount will be determined in early July. The cuts, which come on top of a 15% slash in state funding last year, will hit particularly hard at the state university system. It performs a key role in California education, providing a college education for the

top 33% of California's high school graduates that can't afford or aren't accepted to the UC system—a group that includes many of the state's future schoolteachers. Unlike the more elite UC system, which has substantial income from private endowments and research grants, the state university campuses depend on state funds for 80% of their operating budgets.

But even among the state schools, San Diego State stands out, with more than half of the 340 tenure and tenure-track layoffs expected statewide. The reason for that distinction is that most of the other campuses are apportioning the budget cuts among

all departments. San Diego State did that last year, as did other campuses, says Day, but San Diego had fewer nontenure positions than other campuses and there simply aren't enough potential savings left to spread the pain again. “If we were to take a second, very major cut...there is absolutely no way you can do that without getting into the tenure track,” says Day.

Over the course of the past year, at Day's urging, the faculty senate considered, and ultimately recommended, that future budget cuts be handled with what Day calls a “deep and narrow” strategy, eliminating whole departments and programs, rather than making across-the-board cuts. “If you don't do it this way, everybody gets chopped off one toe at a time, until you find you can't stand up,” says Day. The senate seemed to agree, but the accord didn't last long.

When word came from the state to prepare for cuts, Day went into action, consulting with deans and administrators—but not with the faculty—about which departments to cut. On 12 May, he told the faculty senate that deep and narrow cuts would be coming, and the next day the ax fell on the unsuspecting departments.

But when it wrote the guidelines, the senate intended that such cuts would occur only

after consultation with the faculty, says chemistry professor Charles Stewart, outgoing senate chairman. And, says Stewart, not only were departments not consulted, they weren't even told why they had been cut. “It's been hard to find out what happened,” he says. “Nobody has told us what the process was. That is the biggest sore point.”

Anthropologist Whitney adds that the university has specific procedures for discontinuing programs, which require impact studies that Day did not perform. “A budget crisis is the best possible excuse for not following the rules,” says Whitney, who is preparing a lawsuit against Day.

But Day maintains that he hasn't eliminated programs—he has just laid off faculty and will consider recommendations from the faculty senate to reassign some positions to the empty departments as the budget allows in the future. He says that although the faculty senate endorsed the notion of deep and narrow cuts, “It seemed pretty plain to me they didn't want to suggest particular departments.” So it fell to Day to decide where to apply the knife—and the choices had to be made fast, he adds, leaving little time for consultation. While he won't say why individual departments were chosen, he says he used criteria such as the number of students that would be affected and how central the department was to the university's teaching mission.

By that latter criterion, say faculty members, the budget ax should not have fallen so lightly on athletics. While eliminating some sports, including golf and wrestling, Day overrode a recommendation of the faculty senate by keeping 14 varsity sports—enough to maintain the school's Division 1A status. That decision has inflamed faculty tempers. “How can

you contemplate keeping Division 1A athletics when you are letting a chemistry professor go?” fumes biologist David Archibald.

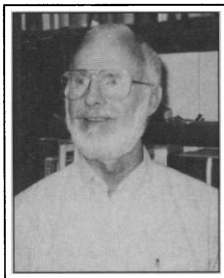
If the final cuts come in at less than 8%, or if the university saves some money on faculty who decide to retire

early, Day says that he will try when possible to keep a “skeleton crew” on in some of the emptied departments to help seniors majoring in those subjects to graduate. But few faculty are expecting such luck, as rumors are spreading that the final budget shortfall will be larger than 8%, requiring still more cuts to be made. That possibility is keeping the anxiety level high on the San Diego campus. “The dread in everyone's mind,” says biology professor Lee McClenaghan, “is that this is not the end of it.”

—Marcia Barinaga

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* The eliminated departments are: anthropology, German and Russian, religious studies, aerospace engineering, health sciences, family studies, industrial technology, natural sciences, and recreation, parks, and tourism. Departments that will suffer serious cuts are French and Italian, art, chemistry, sociology, and telecommunications and film.