

BC's Public Universities and Colleges Need Your Help

We all want a higher education system that serves our needs and which we can be proud of—but each year BC's public universities and colleges are being forced to reduce the quality of education they provide.

Although overall funding for higher education in BC is increasing, the number of students and the costs of equipment, services and supplies are increasing at an even faster rate. As a result, the government provides 12% fewer real dollars per student today than in 2001 and it has no plans to close this gap.

The Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services acknowledges this problem and in its annual pre-budget report called on the provincial government to work with universities and colleges to fix it.

If you want BC's public universities and colleges to stop cutting the quality of education and instead focus on providing the high quality education British Columbians need and deserve, please contact your local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) to tell them it's time to fix the funding problems.

There are four key actions government needs to take to solve the funding crisis for the public universities and colleges:

1. Restore the \$42 million cut from the expected operating grants for 2008/09

On March 13, 2008, the BC government made a surprise cut to the funding that had been promised to public universities and colleges.

Although the amount of money provided to these post-secondary institutions increased overall, the announcement that the amount would be \$42 million less than originally promised came after the institutions had already made substantial spending commitments. As a result, the universities and colleges have had to scramble to make cuts to their budgets.

These cuts have affected institutions in a variety of ways. For example, at Simon Fraser University, plans are being made to cut 30 teaching staff positions and 50 support staff positions. The University of British Columbia has slowed the rate of growth of its Kelowna campus and is clawing money back from all academic departments. The University of Victoria is cutting 30 teaching staff positions and planning to cut support staff positions. The University of Northern British Columbia eliminated teaching and support staff positions last year. Layoffs have already taken place at a number of colleges.

These layoffs and service reductions are taking place despite the fact that the number of students continues to grow. This means that professors have less time to spend with each student and that there will be fewer courses for students to choose from. As a result, the quality of education is falling and it may take students longer to graduate.

2. Increase annual per student funding to public post-secondary institutions to offset the effects of inflation

A large part of the current funding crisis stems from the fact that government funding has not kept pace with the increased costs facing the universities and colleges.

In 2005, the provincial government protected students from large tuition fee increases by limiting these increases to the rate of inflation. To make this plan work without undermining educational quality, the government also had to increase the per student funding by the rate of inflation. Unfortunately, it has not done so, which has led to cuts in quality and the current financial crisis facing the public universities and colleges.

3. Provide full funding for each new student space

If the government wants a public university or college to add new student spaces, you would think that it would provide the necessary funding to do so. However, this has not always been the case.

Although the BC government has provided new money to universities and colleges since 2001/02, it has not provided enough to keep per student funding levels constant. Had the funding kept pace with the increasing number of students and rising prices, public post-secondary institutions would have an additional \$230 million in their budgets today. This is equivalent to 24,600 unfunded student spaces.

4. Provide \$10,000 for each currently unfunded graduate student space

As BC's economy becomes more knowledge-based, the need for people with Masters and Doctoral degrees grows. Students in these advanced programs are tomorrow's decision makers, researchers, innovators, university professors and leaders.

Between 1994 and 2006, there was virtually no government funding to create new graduate student spaces. But in order to meet the needs of students and the needs of the economy, the public universities nonetheless created thousands of spaces.

Finally, in 2007, the provincial government started to fund a few hundred new graduate student spaces each year, but by then the universities had created almost 4,400 spaces without any government funding.

Had government fully funded these spaces, the public universities would have an additional \$88 million in their budgets and not be facing budget cuts and layoffs. If the BC government provided even half of this amount, it would go along way to resolving the university funding problems.

Contact Your Member of the Legislative Assembly

The international financial meltdown makes the need to fix the university and college funding problems all the more urgent. Every time BC experiences a recession, there is an increased demand for post-secondary education as people return to the classrooms to upgrade their skills or take their careers in entirely new directions. Now is the worst time for the BC government to shortchange our post-secondary institutions.

If we are to have the kind of post-secondary education system that BC needs, people have to tell their local MLAs that it's time to fix the funding problems. Please send your MLA an e-mail or a letter right now.

To find out the name and contact information for your MLA, go to the MLA Finder tool on the Legislative Assembly website:

<http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/3-1-1.htm>

By entering your postal code, you can find out the name and e-mail address for your MLA. Time is short. Please send them a message today.