

Ohio higher education budget trims of \$25M may be just the beginning

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Almost \$25 million in new, targeted cuts to the state's higher education budget may be only a warm-up for the drama to come.

But Chancellor Eric Fingerhut said Tuesday that Gov. Ted Strickland remains committed to protecting funding for Ohio's colleges as much as he can with a huge budget deficit looming.

Fingerhut said the budget cuts he recommended last week affect lower-priority programs and scholarships. Items considered critical, such as basic state support and financial aid, were spared.

However, in a letter to college presidents, Fingerhut warned of "even more difficult decisions" in the next two-year budget, with a projected budget shortfall of more than \$7 billion.

"The only way to prepare for those decisions is to restructure or even eliminate programs or initiatives because we simply will not be able to fund everything that is currently in our budget," he wrote.

The current cuts represent less than 1 percent of the state's \$2.8 billion annual budget for higher education. Among the programs affected:

A \$2.2-million program called Priorities in Collaborative Graduate Education, was eliminated. It is meant to help colleges decide the effectiveness of graduate programs, but Fingerhut said other resources are available.

The James A. Rhodes Scholarship match was reduced from \$952,500 to \$60,000 because the foundation that gives private scholarship money hasn't needed as much state matching money, Fingerhut said.

The Choose Ohio First Scholarship was trimmed from \$9.5 million to \$6.5 million because the scholarships are awarded over multiple years and not all of the money is currently being distributed, Fingerhut said. The scholarship is for students who major in science, technology, engineering, math or medicine.

Some programs, such as those that reward colleges for improving student performance, absorbed only modest cuts.

For budget directors at Cleveland State University and the University of Akron, the minimal hit to their operating budgets this time around was a relief.

The careful cuts represented only a 0.18 percent drop in CSU's operating budget, said Tim Long, the university's budget director.

John Case, vice president for finance and administration at UA, said the operating budget cuts there were also less than 1 percent.

But everyone involved knows the work isn't done. In December, Strickland announced a \$640 million gap in the budget for the current fiscal year and a \$7.3 billion budget shortfall for the next two-year budget if spending remains at its current pace and no new money comes in.

Fingerhut said financial officers at the state's public colleges and universities continue to work on ways to collaborate to save money and improve efficiency. A meeting to discuss that topic was set for Tuesday, but had to be rescheduled.

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