

Maricopa Community Colleges proposes consolidation of presidencies to cut costs

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Leaders say changes could make system more efficient; employees reassured after language about staff reductions removed from proposal



(Photo: Maricopa Community Colleges)

The presidencies of Maricopa Community Colleges' 10 campuses would be consolidated under a proposed years-long reorganization that remains short on details.

Talk of consolidating one of the nation's largest community systems has percolated over the past year. But the idea initially worried many of its more than 4,000 employees because language in a resolution insinuated many of the colleges' rank-and-file employees would be losing their jobs.

The reorganization, billed by the college district as a "transformation," is partly driven by the colleges' funding constraints and declining enrollment.

It is also driven, according to college leaders, by the need to adapt to a community college landscape that's radically different from when the district was established more than 50 years ago.

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District leaders hope that the money they save by getting leaner in their workforce will eventually lead to using those savings to provide more support services to students.



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It isn't clear, though, whether these changes will lead directly to a halt in any potential student tuition hikes.

"Times have changed. We don't have the resources that we had," Maricopa Community Colleges Chancellor Maria Harper-Marinick told hundreds of staff, faculty and students this week as she laid out the skeleton of her proposed reorganization.

"The county is not growing in the manner that we expected. So we need to look at different ways today to strategically serve the community in the manner that is expected from us."

How the plan breaks down

The district expects to save about \$1 million by consolidating the top administrative positions in eight of its 10 colleges into four regional administrations. That part of the reorganization breaks down like this:

- One president would oversee a west region that consists of Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale and Glendale Community

College.

- Mesa Community College and Chandler-Gilbert Community College, as well as their satellite campuses, would be overseen by an east region president.
- Another president would be in charge of Scottsdale Community College and Paradise Valley Community College, the district's north region.
- The schools in the central-south region, Phoenix College and South Mountain Community College, also would have a shared president.

The administrations at Rio Salado College, its main provider of online classes, and Gateway Community College would remain the same.

Four colleges · Phoenix, Glendale, Chandler-Gilbert and Paradise Valley · already have vacant presidencies that haven't been filled over the past year.

Details are scarce beyond that.

Early language scared employees

Language in an earlier draft of a resolution that will act as the guiding principle for the colleges' reorganization stated plans would include "redeployment of staff, reductions in force, early retirement offerings or other voluntary separation options."

That, combined with the lack of information, led to concern by many of the employees who have packed recent public hearings.

"When you read about reductions in force, early retirement, redeployment of employees, with no additional information or clarification, it justifiably causes concern," said Kris Bliss, president of the district's Classified Staff Council. Bliss later said she was "encouraged" by the latest draft resolution.

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Linda Thor, [an incoming board member who was elected in November](/story/news/local/arizona-education/2016/11/11/maricopa-community-colleges-board-2-new-members-same-4-3-split/93495744/) (/story/news/local/arizona-education/2016/11/11/maricopa-community-colleges-board-2-new-members-same-4-3-split/93495744/), removed the phrasing about staff reductions that led to fear among the employees. The change was well-received at the most recent meeting Monday in Mesa.

Thor and Laurin Hendrix, the other newly elected member, will take part in a January vote on the resolution.

"I think we're really just at the very beginning and we shouldn't be implying that we've already concluded that we're going to need early retirements and those kinds of things," Thor said.

Reorganization will take years

Linda Thor ousted John Heep for one of the district's two at-large seats. (Photo: Special for The Republic)

Alfredo Gutierrez, president of Maricopa Community Colleges' governing board, said the district's chancellor and the board already have the authority to move ahead with any consolidation plans.

"But if you're going to transform a district that's been in place for 50 years ... it's going to impact students, faculty, staff and the public," Gutierrez said. "So it's demanded by transparency that we go out to the public and present it."

Gutierrez said the reorganization will be carried out by Harper-Marinick, [who was appointed chancellor this year \(/story/news/local/arizona-education/2016/05/04/harper-marinick-appointed-chancellor-maricopa-community-colleges/83952624/\)](/story/news/local/arizona-education/2016/05/04/harper-marinick-appointed-chancellor-maricopa-community-colleges/83952624/) after having served as the district's No. 2 administrator.

Gutierrez did not indicate the specific amount of the district's operating costs that leaders planned to cut through consolidation. He also did not say whether the reorganization would serve as a stopgap for increases in tuition or local property taxes, both of which mostly make up the district's source of funding.

The board has "no inclination to raise tuition or taxes" right now, Gutierrez said, adding that the reorganization "is going to happen over time."

Then he added:

"No one is being let go tomorrow as a consequence of this."

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