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MCCCD weighs tuition hike to bolster campus security



Andrew Olesky, a police officer for Maricopa County Community Colleges, patrols a computer lab on the Glendale Community College campus.

David Wallace/The Republic

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By Mary Beth Fallor
The Republic | azcentral.com
Fri Mar 22, 2013 10:43 PM

A tuition increase for students of Maricopa Community Colleges would pay for a fundamental change to the district's security culture, from an uneven patchwork of guards and aides at the many campuses to a full staff of certified, armed officers.

The community-college district's chief of police is seeking \$2 million to hire 23 additional officers, a 50 percent increase in staffing for the district's Department of Public Safety.

The governing board of the Maricopa County Community College District will vote on a \$5-per-credit tuition increase on Tuesday. Students' costs would increase from \$76 per credit hour to \$81 per credit hour for 2013-14. If approved, the tuition hike would generate an additional \$12.5 million for the district.

Mikel Longman, the district's chief of police, was hired last year to consolidate the 10 colleges' public-safety units, which were independent, into one district department.

Staffing varies at the colleges, ranging from three to six officers on the main campuses. Some smaller satellite campuses have an officer, and some don't.

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Longman's plan would add one or two officers to each campus, and GateWay Community College in Phoenix would get four.

Currently, the ratio of certified police officers to students is 1 to 5,108, Longman said. The additional officers would reduce it to 1 to 3,405.

"It's a basic assumption that when we're open for business, we'll have armed police officers," he said.

Crime on the campuses is fairly low. According to the annual report for 2011, the most recent available, there were no murders, robberies or arsons at any of the colleges. Other districtwide statistics for 2011: four forcible sex assaults, five non-forcible sex assaults, 10 aggravated assaults, 19 burglaries, 21 motor-vehicle thefts, 17 drug arrests, six liquor arrests and two weapons violations.

There were 396 larcenies, which would be incidents such as phone and bike thefts, in 2011, an increase of about a third from two years before. No other crimes showed a notable increase from previous years.

Longman said his officers respond to about 90 percent of campus incidents, with the remainder handled by municipal police. The campuses and branches are in 12 police jurisdictions, and because there is no reporting system, the number, response time and type of incidents the municipal police respond to is unknown.

Earlier this month, the district awarded a \$158,000 contract to establish a security records-management system that should be working by this summer.

Longman also wants to reduce reliance on the part-time security aides, who write parking tickets, monitor surveillance cameras and escort people after dark. He said the aides, who make about \$9 or \$10 an hour, are not reliable in showing up for shifts. There are also about 50 full-time security guards around the district.

"We give our keys to our kingdom to minimum-wage, minimally trained employees, and if something bad happens to our property, it hurts our ability to deliver education," he told the governing board last month.

Besides requesting their second tuition increase in three years, the community colleges are seeking an increase in the property-tax levy, which would generate an additional \$8.1 million. The vote on that will be in May.

The colleges want to add, in addition to police, 32 full-time professors. They also want to update technology and spend \$5 million on two ongoing programs to improve efficiency in registration and financial aid and students' graduation and transfer rates.

Andrew Kuhn, president of the Associated Students of Mesa Community College, said last week that his group is studying the tuition proposal and will likely draft a position before the vote Tuesday.

"The general consensus I've taken from most students is that they're not in favor of it, partly because the last time, when the association was in favor of it, it was under the assumption that it wouldn't happen for another five years," he said.

Kuhn, 25, a business major, said the group acknowledges that funding from the state has decreased — from \$45 million in 2010 to a projected \$8 million for 2013-14.

Barry Vaughn, spokesman for the Maricopa Community Colleges Faculty Association, said his group also has not had time to take a position, but will meet Tuesday afternoon before the vote. He said that, beyond this tuition proposal, the faculty is worried about the spiraling costs of higher education in general.

"It's going to undermine our ability to prepare the next generation of citizens in this country if we cannot get these rapid increases under control," said Vaughn, who is a professor of philosophy and religious studies at Mesa Community College.

"Having said that, we are still going to be by far one of the least expensive options for higher education in Arizona, so we are still a bargain, relatively speaking."

The governing board will meet at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the district office, 2411 W. 14th St., Tempe.

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