

Mesa Community College's Red Mountain campus not closing — for now



Maria Polletta, The Republic | azcentral.com 9:53 a.m. MST April 8, 2016



(Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

Despite a one-two punch of declining enrollment and budget cuts, Mesa Community College has opted not to shutter its Red Mountain campus - for now.

The longtime Mesa institution for months had considered closure as a possible solution to widespread financial woes trickling down from the Maricopa County Community College District.

Instead, it will implement retention and sustainability measures at the nationally recognized, 100-acre campus near Power and McKellips roads, while attempting to streamline operations at the main Southern and Dobson campus as well.

"I cannot guarantee to anybody that we are never going to close (Red Mountain), but right now, that's not our plan," Mesa Community College President Shouan Pan said. "We're not selling it. We're not renting it. Rather, we are trying to work very hard to maintain the campus and stabilize its enrollment."

'Positive and hopeful'

The community college had already reduced overtime pay, slashed supply budgets, hired fewer adjunct professors and increased classroom sizes to cut costs when it got word last year that it would have to slice its roughly \$7 million budget by nearly a third.

The requested \$2.2 million reduction, which needs to be addressed by the fiscal year starting July 1, reflects enrollment drops of nearly a quarter schoolwide and of more than a third at Red Mountain since the 2010-11 school year.



Students study at Mesa Community College Red Mountain campus April 6, 2016. MCC is dealing with declining enrollment and budget constraints. (Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

To close the gap, Mesa Community College has continued its cost-cutting measures and avoided filling most open positions.

In the coming months, certain low-enrollment courses will be canceled, and more Red Mountain faculty and testing, advising and financial-aid staff will split time between the two campuses, according to the school.

Although Pan said he will try to avert layoffs, staff reductions could happen. The reliance on attrition has created imbalances at the department level, some professors say, with some departments having too few faculty for the number of students in their programs and others having too many.

Still, according to biology professor Andrew Holycross, the climate among instructors and staff is better than it was last semester, when the possible closure loomed.

At that time, Holycross had said faculty members were "disheartened" by the prospect of losing a campus with outdoor lab and instruction space, award-winning architecture and a curriculum heavy on environmental and sustainability issues.

That mood has changed.

"Right now, we're feeling positive and hopeful," he said. "The administration has committed resources to trying to attract programs and meet market needs in terms of education in the Valley."

'Helping them through'

Pan confirmed school officials are working on strategies to recruit and retain more students at Red Mountain, but he said some will take time to launch.

A key plan involves expanding the campus' emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs, whether students are interested in pursuing a traditional bachelor's degree or something else.

"We're trying to focus on creating better, more structured academic pathways," Pan said. "For example, we're in the process of talking to Grand Canyon University about some joined advertising efforts and a program where students would start with us and then head directly to GCU for pre-engineering, pre-nursing or education. We may have the first cohort start this fall."

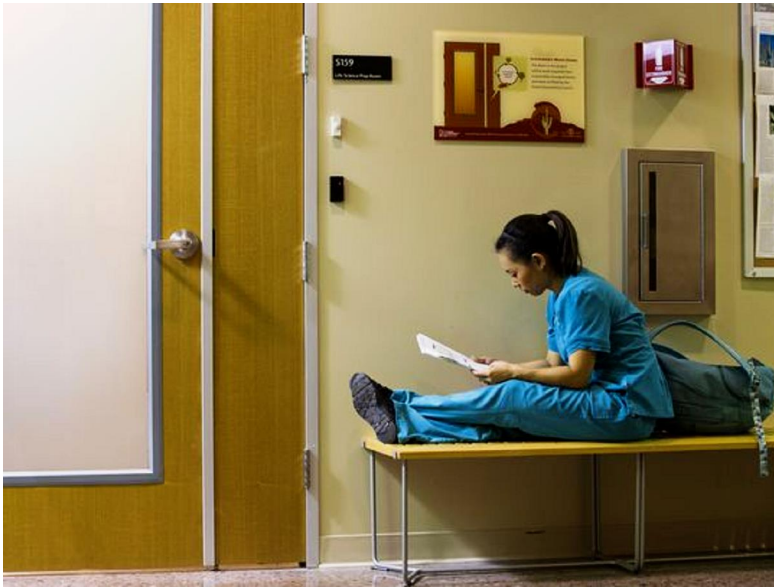
Pan said Mesa Community College is also in talks with Arizona State University's Polytechnic campus, in east Mesa, which long has emphasized STEM

initiatives and entrepreneurship. The Red Mountain campus could be marketed as a starting point for those who want to get a degree from ASU, but haven't decided on a major and want to complete related but more general courses in the meantime.

The school is exploring a similar arrangement with Brigham Young University-Idaho.

To ensure Mesa and southeast Valley students are aware of it as an option, the community college has hired a pair of part-time "high-school liaisons" to explain its offerings and financial-aid possibilities.

"For both the students' and the college's sake, we realize we can no longer just say, 'Come into our system, we have so many classes, choose what fits your schedule,' and then set them loose," Pan said. "We need to do a better job of keeping them and helping them through."



Lauren Ramirez, 30, studies head and neck anatomy before her class at Mesa Community College Red Mountain campus April 6, 2016. MCC is dealing with declining enrollment and budget constraints. (Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

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