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OCC belt-tightening to include transfers, layoffs

By **ERIK LARSEN** • STAFF WRITER • December 6, 2010

TOMS RIVER — Ocean County College unveiled a financial restructuring plan Monday in the wake of its declaration last month that a fiscal emergency exists and more than a dozen staffers would lose their jobs.

The emergency, a legal distinction, gives the college administration of President Jon H. Larson greater authority over its 456 permanent employees, most of whom are members of the union locals of the New Jersey Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers.

The college administration has been feuding with those unions in contract negotiations and now over the cause of the current crisis: a projected \$1.5 million budget deficit for fiscal year 2012, which begins on July 1 and ends on June 30, 2012.

Under the plan, 35 employees are affected, with 22 to be reassigned or transferred on campus, and the remaining 13 to be laid off June 30, 2011.

Had an emergency not been declared, the administration would have had to seek approval from its unions before such transfers or reassignments, an impossible hurdle given the combative attitude of union leaders, Larson contends.

Chris Berzinski, a field representative for the NJEA, said at the college Board of Trustees meeting Monday, "There is, I have to tell you honestly, a lack of credibility on the part of the leadership of this college and its relations with its faculty and staff.

"Doesn't make me happy to come here and say that. I'm not saying it for an advantage at the bargaining table, although we're at an impasse on a number of contracts."

Most of the layoffs are in administration or represent administrative support roles. No faculty members are to be laid off.

The restructuring plan also calls for cuts in overtime and utilities expenses, improved operational efficiencies, better future marketing and

not replacing retiring employees, said Sara Winchester, college vice president of finance.

"These are unprecedented times," Larson said at the meeting. "Our approach to the issues that we face has been to examine every single opportunity to reduce costs, to keep tuition at its present levels and to identify prospects for enrollment growth."

The cause for the fiscal emergency comes from a combination of factors that became a full-blown crisis after two developments: The Ocean County Board of Freeholders informed the college it was cutting \$500,000 in aid next year, and enrollment dropped almost a percentage point this fall when it had been expected to increase 3.5 percent. About 10,600 students are enrolled at OCC.

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Slowing enrollment, drop in aid spell hard times for OCC

BY ERIK LARSEN
STAFF WRITER

TOMS RIVER — Across the state, enrollment at two-year colleges is up an average of 1.3 percent, but the dramatic increases of recent years have all but evaporated, said Jacob Farberman, spokesman for the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges.

The council cites two factors: A drop in taxpayer aid from state and county governments, and the fact

that the last group of baby boomers have seen their children graduate from college, which has created a slight dip in the number of high school graduates enrolled in college.

The next spike in enrollment is expected in just a few years when the children of Generation Xers reach college age, said Jon H. Larson, president of Ocean County College.

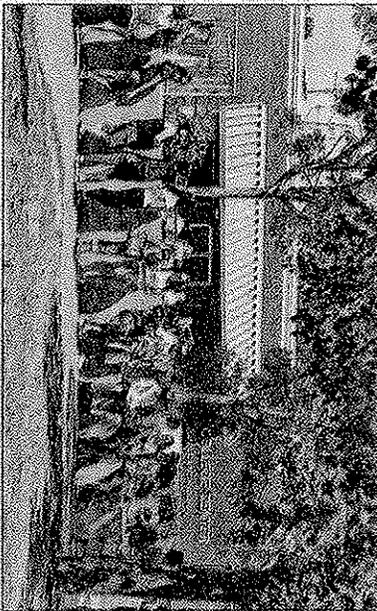
Last month, faced with an almost one percentage

point drop in fall enrollment and a planned \$500,000 cut in aid next

year from the Ocean County Board of Preenholders, OCC administrators declared a fiscal emergency ahead of a projected \$1.5 million budget deficit next year.

The Larson administration announced the college would lay off 13 nonfaculty employees next June.

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STAFF PHOTO: MARY FRANK
Students wait in a line outside the College Center bookstore during the first week of classes at Ocean County College this fall.

OCC

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On Friday, the college Board of Trustees adopted the administration's financial restructuring plan, which calls for reductions in spending and new strategies aimed at marketing OCC better, including new online courses for foreign students.

"We are projecting that enrollment will remain flat at least for fiscal year 2012," said Sara Winchester, college vice president of finance. "After that, we think many of the initiatives that we have under way now will kick in and enrollment will start to go back up."

Farbman said he didn't know if any of the other 18 community colleges in the state were facing similar budget shortfalls.

At Brookdale Community College in Middletown, enrollment is up 263 from fall 2009's count of 16,906 students.

"Our head count and revenue enrollment goals continue to be met," Brookdale President Peter F. Burnham said. "However, in today's difficult economic climate, we must budget conservatively and be ready to make tuition adjustments, maintaining affordability while sustaining our high quality of education and student services."

The Larson administration concedes its declaration of a fiscal emergency is largely a legal instrument that empowers the college president and trustees to terminate employees and transfer personnel without having to first seek approval from its three bargaining units on campus, which are represented by

TUITION AND STUDENT FEE COSTS

Ocean County College

- Tuition: \$94 per credit
- Student Fee: \$17 per credit
- Technology Fee: \$11 per credit

Brookdale Community College

- Tuition: \$118.50 per credit
- General Services Fee: \$28.44 per credit

either the New Jersey Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers.

Larson said relations between the administration and the unions have never been warm in the 10 years that he has led the college. That relationship has taken a particularly unpleasant turn, as all three bargaining units at the college are now working without contracts and are at an impasse in negotiations.

A Facebook page titled "Save Ocean County College," which is critical of the Larson administration, has been up since September. The page questions Larson's \$220,000 salary and why the college is spending millions of dollars on capital projects, such as the planned \$30 million Kean@Ocean Gateway Building, at a time when the college is reducing its work force and claiming budget deficits.

"This is a union environment," Larson said, explaining the unions perceive any change to the status quo as a threat to the power of the collective bargaining unit.

Chris Berzinski, a field representative with the NJEA, could not be reached for comment Tuesday. But Berzinski told a public meeting of trustees last week that the administration had lost credibility with its employees and that

he was receiving almost hourly complaints from union members about the hostile climate on campus.

"They don't know about it, nor care about, nor understand, nor feel that they have to understand, anything about the health of the larger organization," Larson said. "They believe that the only value is that the set of jobs that we have here now are always the set of jobs we will have."

If the future of OCC is dependent on growth and the college is now at capacity and needs more buildings in order to expand its current student population of 10,600, a continuing investment in capital projects is essential, Larson said.

"So that has been met with for some employees a slogan of 'jobs not buildings.' Well, I understand their concern that they'd rather save this position over here and postpone that over there," he said.

The positions eliminated were made redundant either by new technologies or efficiencies. While Larson said he believes in being fair and compassionate, he said the college cannot put preserving unnecessary employment ahead of its institutional interests.

"If we abandon that, to merely keep employed everybody who is here regardless of the cost, we're mak-

ing, I think, a tragic error. That is not the plan we're going to follow," he said.

Freeholder John C. Bartlett Jr. said the Gateway Building is the most important milestone in the history of the college. Bartlett was a member of OCC's first graduating class and later taught political science at the college. On the freeholder board, he serves as liaison to OCC.

"This place represents opportunity," Bartlett said. "It's part of what makes America great. . . . If you work hard, apply yourself and take advantage of the opportunities that are there, you can improve your lot in life.

"But the opportunities have to be there, and that is what this represents," he added.

Bartlett said community colleges largely attract recent high school graduates who are not sure higher education is for them as well as adults who never went to college but later in life have decided there is a need either for personal reasons or to meet new career goals.

"Ocean County College is an opportunity for them to say: 'Well, let me try. Let me see if I can do this.' That's where community college is vastly different than a four-year college. A community college has to be a cheerleader for those students, because a portion of the students who are coming here are not sure," he said.

"If you apply yourselves and you work, you can do it, but you have to do it. That person gets that step up and they continue on from here. That is why it is so apt to call that building the Gateway Building. Because it is."

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