



GUEST OPINION: SSU faculty skeptical of finances

By SUSAN MOULTON

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I write in response to the July 25 article titled, "SSU foundation's private land loans."

Sonoma State University faculty members have been even more concerned than local community members and donors about the management of university finances during the past decade.

Faculty and students deeply appreciate the generous support of the community through patronage and scholarships. This funding has made college possible for many who otherwise could not attend. But faculty leaders have been alarmed about the redirection of university funds away from classes.

In 2007, 73.4 percent of the faculty voted no confidence in President Ruben Armiñana. We requested legally mandated shared governance and a decisive faculty voice in university funding decisions and budgetary oversight. Following the explicit recommendation of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the agency that reviews SSU for continued academic accreditation, we demanded that university resources be realigned with the university's academic mission.

The faculty called for an outside performance audit to clarify the administration's use of millions of taxpayer dollars. If an audit was performed, to date it has not been released.

Over the past six years, SSU has reduced its faculty positions while student enrollment and administrative numbers, salaries and promotions have soared. Historically, SSU took pride in its small classes and close student-faculty relationships. But the steady loss of money for classes and teachers has drastically reduced student access to faculty. SSU students now have the least access to faculty among like-sized campuses in the California State University system.

The recent decision by CSU trustees to raise student fees (tuition) by 30 percent and to furlough faculty and staff thus affects debt-ridden Sonoma State proportionally more than other CSU campuses. (SSU faculty members have the lowest salaries in the CSU system.)

The campus general fund, University Enterprises (including the bookstore and food services) and the Sonoma State Academic Foundation now service almost a quarter of a billion dollars of debt, costing the campus more than \$5 million annually, much of it to cover the overwhelming cost of the Green Music Center.

Meanwhile, two recent independent studies reveal that SSU spends between \$4 million and \$6 million more on administration than do other CSU campuses of our size. In 2007, SSU

administrators, even after three years of significant annual pay raises, received a raise of 11.8 percent — while they asserted simultaneously that money wasn't available to provide additional classes needed by our students.

In 2008-09, while the number of students increased dramatically, the administration cut courses and academic programs. Numerous faculty members were not rehired. That same year, the administration spent nearly \$7 million on raises for managers and new administrative positions supported by the general fund, foundation and other campus resources.

Budgetary information on foundation accounts and sources for “reimbursed positions” is currently not accessible to the public, although SB 218 by state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, intends to remedy that.

Sonoma State's administrators dispute these findings, but have provided no contrary evidence. As a result, we have ineffective budgetary oversight.

Increased administrative expenses are not supportable when student fees are drastically increased, classes and academic programs cut, retired faculty not replaced, adjunct faculty not rehired and all employees forced to take furloughs.

SSU faculty members struggle to offer a quality education in the face of vastly diminished resources.

Narrowly speaking, administration policies that guided the Sonoma State Academic Foundation's loan practices may have been legal. But they appear to be neither ethical nor prudent. They are symptomatic of the larger problems of redirecting money to increasing administrative numbers, promotions and high salaries, servicing a growing debt and short-changing California's students.

They call for legislative oversight of CSU finances and for renewed community oversight into projects such as the Green Music Center, land acquisition and other foundation activities.

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