



STATE POLITICS

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While Miami Dade, Broward colleges take a budget hit — public universities get more

BY KRISTEN M. CLARK

Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — As Senate President Joe Negron aims to make Florida's 12 public universities "elite" destinations, state lawmakers this spring voted to give an extra \$232 million next year to those institutions — while simultaneously cutting \$25 million that has helped the state's 28 state colleges serve students who are most in need.

The stark difference in funding priorities was received as a decisive insult to institutions like Miami Dade College and Broward College — and the tens of thousands of students they serve: That they don't matter as much as the universities.

"That, I think, is what is the most demoralizing part of the conversation. ... we're disinvesting in them," MDC Executive Vice President and Provost Lenore Rodicio said in reference to the 800,000 students served by the Florida College System. "This population of students, in a sense, don't count as much as students who are more elite, more high performing."

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Broward College President J. David Armstrong

Bill Galvano, a top Senate Republican who helped craft the 2017-18 higher education budget, said there's a longer term plan to help the colleges, too, and that any inference by the colleges of a sleight is "short-sighted."

But with Negron, R-Stuart, laser-focused this year on the universities first and foremost, administrators at state colleges feel those efforts came at their students' expense — especially when the state banked \$1 billion in reserve spending it could have tapped to, at least, keep the college system's funding level.

"When we had record windfall of money for the state budget, we [the colleges] appear to be about the only place that got cuts," Broward College President J. David Armstrong said. "It's bad for Florida's future. It sends a message to Floridians that perpetuates social and economic inequities."

"It doesn't send us a good message," agreed Timothy Beard, president of Pasco-Hernando State College. "You would think being highlighted and exalted as perhaps the best two-year and state college system in the country you would want to maintain that as a legislator. ... If you're going to give the universities an additional [several hundred million dollars], I'm sure you can give 30 million back and at least hold us harmless."



Broward College President J. David Armstrong

Broward College is poised to be cut by at least \$2.3 million in 2017-18, Armstrong said. On the whole, MDC stands to lose at least \$5 million and potentially as much as \$14 million, Rodicio said — depending on how well it meets higher benchmarks for performance-based funding, for which lawmakers also raised the bar for the colleges next year.

Many supporters of the college system are urging Gov. Rick Scott to reject the Legislature’s approved funding for 2017-18 of \$1.2 billion, a 2 percent cut from this year — a veto that could require lawmakers to return to Tallahassee for a special session. (Similar vetoes are possible in base funding for K-12 public schools, as well as a related policy bill that’s drawn intense opposition.)



Education secretary DeVos tours FIU

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos toured FIU's College of Nursing and Health Science on April 6, 2017.

David Santiago and Alex Harris - Miami Herald

“We are asking you to contact Gov. Rick Scott and urge him to VETO the budget items that include these cuts to Miami Dade College, and the entire Florida College System,” United Faculty of Miami Dade College said in an email blast Thursday. “These latest cuts, if allowed to stand, would be another blow to our core mission of providing affordable, high-quality and accessible higher education opportunities for our community.”

As of Thursday afternoon, Scott’s office said it had received 373 emails and 31 letters voicing opposition to the college system budget, with no feedback supporting it. (The governor’s office got another three phone calls, eight emails and three letters opposing a related higher education policy bill, SB 374. Three phone calls and three emails had been sent in favor of that legislation.)

The \$232 million net boost to the public universities — to “push for national excellence,” as Galvano described it on the Senate floor — comes primarily from \$54 million in additional operational dollars for individual universities, an extra \$52 million in aid to the state’s top and up-and-coming research universities, and \$120 million across two new programs aimed at recruiting and retaining the best faculty and professional staff. The universities altogether serve about 300,000 students, less than half of what the colleges do.

Where the state colleges are taking a direct hit next year is in \$30.2 million stripped from developmental education, or remedial coursework for students who aren’t college-ready when they enroll.

In 2013, lawmakers scaled back from requiring students to take remedial classes, because they saw too many of them paying for coursework that earned them no credit toward a degree, Galvano said.

“Graduation rates for students who started in remedial programs was very, very small. Something had to change,” said Galvano, the Senate’s higher education budget chairman from Bradenton who is in line to take over as chamber president after the 2018 election. “It was becoming a source of revenue without producing opportunity long term.”

So in the years since, colleges emphasized tutoring labs and other means to get students up to speed. The number of students directly served by the developmental education dollars fell by more than half, while the funding stayed the same, Galvano said.

The Senate originally sought to cut all \$55 million in developmental education aid, but lawmakers compromised on the \$30 million cut in the final budget approved May 8.

“I don’t think the impacts are going to be as negative as they are claiming they will be,” Galvano said.

But college presidents and administrators around the state say they’re not exaggerating when they raise alarms.

They say the reduced funding will prevent them from expanding — or even force them to scale back — on critical tutoring and advising services, require them to hold vacant positions open or, in the case of Broward College, to even potentially close a satellite campus. (“We have one in Coral Springs that might shut down,” Armstrong said.)

Miami Dade College will take the brunt of the cuts to remedial education — \$6.1 million, or 20 percent of the statewide reduction.

Rodicio said the lost funding will make it more difficult for the college to maintain services, such as one-on-one advising and the staff to support it. (The college has already frozen 200 open positions campus-wide for some time, she said.)

“We have a very large population of students that really needs high levels of support in order to keep them on the right track,” Rodicio said, emphasizing how critical the advising support is.

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Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton

Of the 140,000 students who attend MDC, 66 percent come from low-income families, and 45 percent of those live below the poverty line. “For many of them, we are the only option,” Rodicio said. “We’re the last answer to fulfilling a dream to really change the cycle.”

When lawmakers emphasize creating a “destination” university system, “that indicates you’re trying to attract a particular type of student, and that sends the wrong message,” she added. “It’s what hurts the most.”

Armstrong agreed: “Those seeking the American dream are the students we serve. Not only are we not providing them with additional support and investment in Florida’s future — we’re cutting them. It’s very, very frustrating.”

Galvano said the colleges shouldn’t take offense at the funding cut, saying it’s linked to the reduced enrollment in remedial courses and not a reflection of the colleges’ performance.

Long-term, he said, “there is a plan here” — hinting at bigger goals to boost the college system in upcoming legislative sessions.

And he noted that some of the policies in SB 374 prop up the colleges, as well as the universities. For instance, one provision streamlines pathways for students to spend their first two years at a state college and finish at a nearby public university.

“If you’re staging it out, we’re not dismissing the value of the state college system,” he said.

However, there’s another part of SB 374 that has had college leaders feeling under attack since even before session began in March: New caps on how much they can grow bachelor’s degree programs and provisions that emphasize the college’s primary function as training students to meet local workforce needs, not provide four-year degrees. (Miami Dade College offers about 20 four-year degrees, and Broward College has about 10.)

Lawmakers in February advocated for the caps by saying they saw “wasteful duplication” with university degrees and complaining that the colleges “became like a competitive state with the university system.”

Armstrong said the colleges can accommodate the new restriction, but he said “it just doesn’t make any sense” — especially coming from a Republican-majority Legislature that values free market and free enterprise.

“It’s bad policy,” he said.

Kristen M. Clark: 850-222-3095, kclark@miamiherald.com, [@ByKristenMClark](https://twitter.com/ByKristenMClark)

