

Legislative budget talks continue

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Administrators have spent an average of two days a week in Austin this semester, examining a variety of ways to make up a shortfall in funds caused by a continued seven-year decline in enrollment here.

Last week, university President Robert Witt said administrators were continuing discussions with the Legislature.

"The talks are going as smoothly as we could expect," he said. "At this time, it's just too early to tell."

Meetings focus on covering funding shortfall resulting from 7-year enrollment decline

Tuesday, administrators continued answering legislators' questions about the university budget, funding for special projects and a proposed athletics fee.

A university's general revenue is determined by a state formula that depends on enrollment. Universities submit request documents prior to the beginning of each legislative session, and officials are required to

attend hearings to answer questions.

Enrollment here declined 1 percent to 17,880 this semester from 18,063 in spring 1998.

Dan Williams, senior vice president for finance and administration, said despite the enrollment decline, the university may make up the lost funding — about \$3.1 million — if the total amount of funds available to pub-

lic higher education institutions is increased.

"If they (legislators) increase the pool of funds by 15 to 20 percent, we would get 15 to 20 percent, roughly, more than we would have gotten otherwise," he said. "That means that an institution that has growing enrollment is going to see a considerable improvement in their funds vs. an institution that has got declining enrollment."

He added that an increase in the total amount of funds available for higher education institutions would allow colleges and

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universities with decreased enrollment to have a flat, rather than smaller, budget.

Williams said administrators will have more information in mid-April after the state comptroller's office reports how much funding is in the treasury.

Tom Marshall, spokesperson for Sen. Chris Harris, R-Arlington, said at this time it looks as though the total amount of general revenue available for higher education institutions is not likely to increase significantly. But he added that another avenue for the university to make up lost funds is through a change that may take place in the way state funds are formulated.

Marshall said legislators are discussing giving higher education institutions additional funding for students who are early-generation college students or are from low-income families.

Legislators are also discussing changing how some universities, including UTA, will receive funds for facilities improvements and equipment, Williams said.

Currently, the university receives money from the Permanent University Fund for building repair and renovation and to purchase equipment, such as for computer labs. But the PUF has yielded less revenue in the last 10 years partly because the oil and gas industry, which the fund depends on, has experienced profit declines, Williams said.

Some other universities' facilities funds come from the Higher Education Assistance Fund, which does not depend on the oil and gas industry. Williams said funds available to those universities exceeds those available from PUF due to how PUF funds are managed and distributed.

"The bottom line is that UTA gets less money by participating in the Permanent University Fund than if it were participating in the Higher Education Assistance Fund."

Williams said the university would receive approximately \$4.2 million more each year through the HEAF and that legislators are considering moving some public higher education institutions into HEAF.

Administrators have also answered legislators' questions about a proposed athletics fee Senate bill that would charge students here up to \$7.75 per semester credit hour beginning in the fall.

Dr. Witt said legislators support the bill.

"I am confident that the intercollegiate athletics fee will pass," he said.

Williams said an additional revenue source may be special funding for projects.

He said the university may gain up to \$5.3 million for special projects, including \$100,000 in additional funds for the Center for Mexican American Studies, \$250,000 for the Automation and Robotics Research Institute, \$750,000 for the Energy Systems Research Center and \$493,000 for an educational leadership program that will train students how to be effective public school administrators in areas that have high minority populations. The funds requested are each year for a two-year period, Williams said.

He added that it's too early to tell how much of the requested funds will be granted.

"At this point, we don't know where they stand because we are asked at this point in the legislative session to provide information to the Legislature, mainly to the House Appropriations Committee and the Senate Finance Committee," he said. "Our main reason to be there is just to answer questions."