

Students man phones to protest proposed school cuts

By Bill Hess

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Native Alaskan students at Anchorage Community College and the University of Alaska at Anchorage joined other students last week in manning direct telephone and telegraph lines to the state legislature. The students are concerned that spending reductions in state government are going to have a harmful effect on higher education in Alaska.

Members of the Alaska Native and American Indian Student Organization decided to help run the phone project, which also allowed students to send telegrams, after hearing a presentation from Larry "Snoopy" Smith, the president of the Student Association of UAA.

Smith warned that budget trimming in the Alaska government could mean that many students now attending college in Alaska would be forced to drop out, and that many potential future students might miss the opportunity for higher education.

One method that might be used to cut students back,

Smith says, is to raise the grade point entrance requirements from a current 2.1 to 2.8. "If this happens, a lot of the students who will be cut out of college will be Native," Smith claims. "A lot of students from the bush who might have gone to school could miss their chance."

"I wish that when they start cutting the budget, they could look at other agencies. What's happening," Smith says, "is that the federal government under Ronald Reagan wants to cut education, and turn that responsibility over to the states. Yet Alaska wants to cut back. It's a Catch-22 situation."

Although the Alaskan government has gone on a spending spree the past few years as a result of new and unprecedented oil wealth, Smith claims the university system has not received its share of the growth. Since 1980, Smith cites figures which show average annual growth in funding for the university to be 13%. At the same time, student enrollment has been increasing by 10%. "Add inflation into this,"

Smith claims, "and comparatively, funding has actually been reduced." Meanwhile, the budgets of other state agencies have grown by an average of 73.5 percent, claims Smith. His figures come from the Institutional Studies department of UAA.

Smith says Alaska currently spends 7% of its operating budget on education. "That is the lowest of any state in the country," claims Smith. "Alaska ranks number 50! Texas, for example, spends 36.3 percent of their budget on education!"

The board of regents this year recommended a budget of \$148,951,100. All of the campuses within the state approved the recommendation. Governor Hammond has recommended a budget of \$137,048,000, and educators figure it would take \$134,798,000 to continue services at the same level as last year when the budget was \$124 million. An additional \$8,740,400 in pay raises has since been added to both the Board of Regents and the governor's figures.

Many legislators would like to cut back on this program as well. "I can see some justification in cutting back on the loans if they would use the money to provide more education in Alaska," Smith says. "They don't plan to do that." Most of the loan money, Smith claims, goes to students who attend colleges and universities Outside. According to Institutional Studies, two-thirds of Alaskan students seeking higher education attend schools Outside. Other states average the opposite, with two-thirds staying in the state, and the rest going elsewhere.

Smith claims that increased

spending and improved services could not only keep more students in the state, but could help improve the economics of Alaska as dollars that now follow students Outside would remain within the state.

Alaska House Finance Committee chairman Al Adams of Kotzebue does not feel student fears of cuts so severe that many students will have to drop out are justified. Adams stresses that the final subcommittee appropriations recommendations have not yet been made, and that until this is done, any speculation on what restrictions will be made on higher education in Alaska is premature.