TO: Alamo Colleges Family  
FROM: Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor  
DATE: January 14, 2011  
RE: The Road Ahead

Colleagues,

Welcome back from what I hope was a joyous and relaxing holiday break. Although 2011 is looking to be a very challenging year for higher education, I hope on a personal level, that each of you will prosper and enjoy good health.

If you weren’t aware, just before the holiday break, we were directed by the state leadership to cut an additional 2.5% from this year’s state funding allocation. This is on top of the 7% we are already struggling to cut. Combined, these reductions represent approximately a $15 million loss in state support this fiscal year. In addition, we have been directed to cut 10% in each of the next two years, with all indications from legislators that these cuts will be even greater.

On Tuesday, the 82nd Legislative Session convened and we recently learned from Comptroller Combs that the budget deficit for the state is larger than anticipated, approximately $27 billion. In a recent meeting with the Education Advisor to Speaker Straus, it was conveyed that the base budget, which is to be released in the next week or so, will be very challenging and that higher education will be “especially hard hit.” Thus, I am again asking each member of the Alamo Colleges Family to communicate directly with our legislators and governor to dissuade them from taking such large cuts from higher education. So far, higher education has suffered 41% of the cuts already implemented. As a sector, we are taking the brunt of the reductions.

Secondary education will also be slashed so we must broaden our case and explain that those cuts will impact higher education’s ability to graduate more students at a time when there is increased demand for greater student success. Without support and help from the policy makers to implement proactive legislation, we can’t effectively achieve our mission.

With so much funding lost or in jeopardy, the burden again rests with us to identify new and more efficient strategies to deliver instruction and provide support for our students. For example, only 12% of our entering Developmental Education students successfully enter college credit courses. We simply can’t afford, academically or financially, to continue with an approach that results in an 88% failure rate. It is critical that we collectively determine more effective strategies to address the investment we are making in what is essentially a marginally-productive program for our students. It’s this kind of data that is causing legislators to believe that radical change is required and that the best way to achieve such change is to drastically reduce our funding. Another example is our low graduation rate. The public perceives this as a substantial failure on our part and the legislators are responding by demanding a new accountability system that will, if adopted, require higher education to “earn” a portion of its base aid funding through performance measures. Called “Momentum Points” (See Chancellor’s Web Page, Reports and Documents, Momentum Points), this strategy has considerable support from leading legislators and will very likely be adopted during this session. Thus, we have no choice but to rethink our academic strategies to ensure greater student success with fewer resources. What is crucial to appreciate is that there will be less money, not more, to improve our student’s performance, which will require us to redesign our systems and architect new approaches to realizing our mission. The funds simply won’t be there to continue to operate as we traditionally have.
The 25 strategies we collectively developed last summer and are now implementing was an excellent starting place to reducing operational costs. We did not address our academic model then and we have no alternative but to do so now as our next phase in responding to the state’s cuts. To this end, I’ve asked the faculty leadership to help organize an Academic Summit designed to gather ideas and develop strategies that take a proactive approach to improving student success in context with our fiscal realities. We can’t continue to react to the additional state cuts by simply continuing to increase class sizes and the FT/PT faculty ratios as ultimately we will have no choice but to reduce academic support for students as our only remaining option. Colleges and universities across the nation faced with severe budget reductions have implemented a number of different approaches that are improving the outcomes of teaching and learning at reduced costs and we must pursue similar strategies. Student success remains at the core of what we do; it is our number one priority.

As always, I will keep you informed of the emerging challenges we are all facing and urge you to take an active role in communicating with our legislators and governor. Please use our new web site, Government Relations, to obtain the addresses of our representatives and to follow the bills that may be adopted and impact higher education. It is important to remember that the clear message we are receiving is that the state’s leadership will be unresponsive to our pleas if we aren’t able to show that we are changing to improve student success with fewer resources. Thus, it is our responsibility to show through good faith actions that we are taking a leadership position in navigating into a new reality.

Despite this troubling economic news and forecast, I remain optimistic about the road ahead. The Alamo Colleges are anchored by professional and dedicated employees and I truly appreciate the contributions that each of you make every day in support of our students and communities. In the profound words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Working together, we will emerge from this crisis as a stronger district and continue our leadership position as the number one educational services provider in the region.

c: Board of Trustees

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