

UT defends plan to close Cactus Cafe

School officials to address budget, proposed tuition increase at town hall meeting today.

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University of Texas officials, deep in belt-tightening mode, are defending a plan to shut down an iconic cafe in the student union as well as a long-running program of informal classes for the public.

"I'm not thinking of turning back," Juan González, vice president for student affairs, said Monday. "This is not a placebo to test public receptivity to these kinds of cuts. This is for real."

The Cactus Cafe, a music venue and bar in the Texas Union, has been a springboard for Lyle Lovett and other musicians. It is to be eliminated in August, along with the classes in everything from sewing to investing, as part of a cost-cutting effort that has reached into virtually every aspect of the university's operations.

UT President William Powers Jr. will host a public town hall meeting today concerning the belt tightening, which began months ago at his direction but has taken on new urgency with a directive from Gov. Rick Perry to plan for a reduction of 5 percent, or \$29 million, in the state-funded portion of the current biennial budget.

"This is very difficult and painful work," Powers said last month on his blog, Tower Talk. "I applaud our faculty, department chairs and deans for the progress they've made. I also believe that if we make strategic and disciplined decisions, we can emerge from the recession closer to our goal of becoming the nation's best public university."

In another budget-related development, Powers submitted a proposal to the UT System on Monday for a 3.95 percent tuition increase for each of the next two academic years. That is also expected to be discussed at today's forum, which will be at 4 p.m. in the Avaya Auditorium, Room 2.302, in the Applied Computational Engineering and Sciences Building, 24th Street and Speedway.

Also on Monday, eight employees in UT's information technology services unit were let go, although two or three of them will be offered positions at lower salaries, said Kevin Hegarty, the university's vice president and chief financial officer. That brings to 70 the number of occupied or vacant positions — mostly administrative or management slots — that have been eliminated in the past few months as part of a reorganization of that unit intended to save \$5.6 million.

Other layoffs in recent months included those of 13 staff members in the Cockrell School of Engineering and 16 staff members in the McCombs School of Business. The College of Liberal Arts, UT's biggest academic unit, has dropped a plan to retool foreign language instruction, but scores of lecturers and graduate students could lose teaching appointments in various disciplines, said Richard Flores, senior associate dean. A handful of staff members in the college have been laid off, he said.

The plan to shutter the Cactus Cafe has drawn sharp criticism from musicians and many of their fans. González said eliminating the cafe and the informal classes — some of which are taught in the Texas Union, some elsewhere on campus — would yield a net annual savings of \$122,000 after the employees involved are assigned to other duties.

The cafe and classes serve mostly nonstudents, and the university's highest duty is to serve students, he said. "Running and operating a bar and venue for local artists falls below the line of what the union ought to be doing."

One option, which González rejected, would be to cut the union's hours. It's currently open from 7 a.m. to 3 a.m.

"We've got 50,000 students," he said. "When you and I are getting ready for bed at 10 p.m., they're getting ready to start working. I want them to feel safe, comfortable, snuggle up and be in the union until they're done. It's almost as if it's the campus living room or family room."

The space occupied by the cafe would be used for musical performances, comedy acts, plays and other events chosen by students, González said. Rooms in the union currently used for informal classes would be freed up for use by the roughly 1,000 clubs and organizations on campus, and for lectures and other events, he said.

"There's a dearth of available space for those kinds of activities now," González said.

Powers could not be reached for comment Monday. A message he posted on the UT Web site last week, before the announcement concerning the cafe and the informal classes, said today's town hall would focus on budget reallocations, tuition and the governor's directive.

The tuition proposal was crafted by a panel of faculty members, students and administrators who said a 3.95 percent increase is needed because of a projected decline in state appropriations, lower endowment payouts and required set-asides for student financial aid.

The amount reflects a certain political calculation. The Texas House approved a nonbinding resolution last year urging boards of regents to limit annual tuition increases to 3.95 percent or \$280, whichever is greater. The UT System Board of Regents plans to consider the tuition proposal in March, said Matt Flores, a spokesman for the system.

The cost-cutting measures already under way are intended in part to reallocate money so that a pool equal to 2 percent of universitywide salaries would be available for targeted merit raises for faculty and staff members next year, Hegarty said. Retaining and recruiting top faculty members is the top priority.

The governor's request to plan for a 5 percent reduction in state general revenue funds could throw a wrench into the initiative, because it might be necessary to forgo some of the planned raises, Hegarty said.

"We're going to be thoughtful and at the same time cautious to come up with a plan that responds to the governor's request as best we can," he said. "The last thing we would want is to cut something critical only to find out we didn't have to cut it."

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