

# Florida Set For New Cut In Spending On Colleges

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

MIAMI — Florida lawmakers contend that education is essential to high-wage jobs in the state, but the Legislature is again expected to slash millions of dollars from the budget for higher education and may usher in another round of tuition increases.

A proposal in the House would reduce state financing by nearly \$250 million next year and would allow universities to increase tuition by as little as 8 percent and as much as 15 percent. A measure in the Senate would cut more than \$500 million and would allow smaller institutions that are defined as colleges to raise tuition by 3 percent (the full-scale universities would not be permitted to raise tuition).

The cuts in Florida began four years ago and have continued unabated. Since 2008, state spending on education has dropped by 24 percent and is now at 2003 levels. Meanwhile, universities have raised tuition every year, putting many students in a financial bind. Florida's 11 public universities have been raising tuition 15 percent a year for the past four years, and some of them for five years, although they still rank among the least expensive in the nation.

Forty-one states cut higher education spending last year, from 1 percent in Indiana and North Carolina to 41 percent in New Hampshire, according to a recent study conducted by the Illinois State University Center for the Study of Higher Education and the State Higher Education Executive Officers group.

Eduardo J. Padrón, the president of Miami Dade College, said the cuts in higher education spending in Florida were shortsighted.

"At a time when institutions are growing and trying to serve a lot of students who realized that the only way to become a part of the middle class is by getting a college education, the state continues to disinvest in education," said Dr. Padrón, whose college has country's largest enrollment (not including online schools) and graduates the most blacks and Hispanics. "There should be no question that at this point in America today, investment in higher education is paramount."

Gov. Rick Scott, who in 2011 sought steep spending cuts to public schools, changed course this year. Calling a good education the "bedrock of any sound, sustainable economy," Mr. Scott pushed to increase spending on public elementary, junior high and high schools next year by \$1 billion, a move that would come close to making up the \$1.3 billion cut last year.

But he did not include additional money for universities and colleges, although he did not advocate any reductions, either. The governor also strongly opposes letting universities raise tuition again.

"I don't believe in tuition hikes," said Mr. Scott, a Republican, who added that he wanted the state's universities to focus more on science, technology, engineering and math.

Colleges and universities are in a quandary: Spending cuts, combined with a freeze on tuition, mean fewer teachers and the

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closing of certain programs.

Under the Senate budget proposal, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton stands to lose \$47 million, one-third of the financing it receives from the state.

"The passage of the proposed budget cuts to Florida Atlantic University would have a devastating effect on the future of F.A.U.," said Mary Jane Saunders, the university's president. "F.A.U. provides a \$4 billion economic impact to its six-county service region, and these cuts would be shattering to all we serve."

Dr. Padrón, whose college serves some of the state's poorest students and who says he raises tuition as a last resort, agreed. "If we have budget cuts and we don't have the opportunity to raise tuition, we are going to be in crisis mode," he said.

For some universities, the situation is dire. The University of South Florida in Tampa stands to lose a crippling 58 percent of its financing under the Senate bill. It was singled out as the result of a fight with Senator JD Alexander, chairman of the Budget Committee, over the university's unwillingness to sever its ties with its Lakeland branch.

Mr. Alexander, who is serving out his final year in the Senate because of term limits, has pushed for independence for the Lakeland campus, the University of South Florida Polytechnic, which has 4,400 students. He wants to make it the state's 12th university, but the University of South Florida opposes the idea.

A flood of e-mails, calls and appearances at the Capitol last week by University of South Florida students and faculty members led to some relief: Senate budget writers freed up \$25 million for the university.

Mr. Alexander said the cuts were calculated according to each school's reserve fund. The University of South Florida said it did not have the most reserve funds, yet it drew the largest cut. The university will also lose out because it must absorb \$25 mil-

lion in costs associated with the effort to close the Lakeland campus.

The budget bill still includes language for turning the Lakeland campus into the state's 12th university.

"I think for any university to fly in the face of an entire Legislature would be a foolhardy decision," Mr. Alexander said last week.

Mr. Alexander's treatment of



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Gov. Rick Scott has called for an increase in education spending this year, but not for colleges and universities.

the university has led to a barrage of criticism in Tampa, and he has been accused of being vengeful.

"The whole notion that we would set up a 12th university when we are cutting the budget for the other 11 is ridiculous," said Pam Iorio, who served two terms as Tampa's mayor and left the job last year. "This is just something that he wants. He wants it as a legacy project, to be able to leave office and to say in his hometown that this university was created by him."

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