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Keeping the Promise of Education Alive

A Candid Conversation with Cabrillo College's Brian King about Staying Positive in Troubled Times

by Linda Fridy

In many ways, Cabrillo College sits at the hub of what's happening with California's economy. Like all state institutions that depend on their funding from Sacramento, college officials have been riding a roller coaster from one late and shrinking California budget to another. Meanwhile, Santa Cruz County residents trying to cope with their

own financial challenges and still compete in a troubled job market turn to the community college for help.

Cabrillo's budget challenges are daunting. Even after cutting about \$3 million this year from its \$59 million general fund budget — which included completely eliminating the short winter session and continued reductions of adjunct faculty — trustees decided to pull \$1.8 million from reserves rather than cut

more. And they anticipate mid-year reductions come January.

Yet budget cuts or not, Cabrillo remains the most affordable and accessible local option for anyone who believes that education is the best bet to improve odds of getting a decent job in a lingering recession. A high school diploma is not enough for many employers, and even

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public university costs have outpaced the ability of many families to pay tuition. And in spite of fees of just \$26 a unit, nearly 1,000 more Cabrillo students requested financial aid this year than last.

Outsourced and downsized workers need new skills to complete in the still-tight job market.

As Cabrillo College president, Brian King has a unique understanding of this cross-road.

He recently sat down with *The Post* to talk about the state of higher education in California and Cabrillo College in particular.

The Changing Role

In the past, Cabrillo has been, as King said, "all things to all people" — from recent high school graduates to life-long learners to those seeking a new pastime.

To manage deep cuts, King says that the college has to focus.

Specifically, King sees the college's most important duties are helping students looking for careers — either vocational training intended to certify a person in a technical field, or general courses aimed at pushing a student onto a four-year program and a bachelor's degree.

Then, he said, there is the student who did not prepare for college. Those students need extra support learning to work at a more demanding level before they can pursue either a degree or skilled job training.

People in all three of these categories are coming to Cabrillo in greater numbers than ever. This fall the college has a near-record 16,000 students, and would have even more if all of them could get the classes they wanted, King said.

However, Cabrillo was forced to cut about 100

course offerings trying to balance the budget, and that means students can't always enroll in the classes they want and need.

Yet even though it can't serve every student that would like to attend, Cabrillo is still not being paid for all the ones

"It's so clear that what we do does make a difference in the lives of students," he said.

Keeping Degree Students on Track

California long ago abandoned its dream of a free college education for its high

Staff tries to address the latter by emphasizing that financial aid is available and encouraging students to try to enroll full-time.

Unfortunately, even those students who complete the required courses for a transfer don't always get in as the Cali-

has been a hive of construction activity over the last several years. First, new student services buildings framed the college's entrance; then the lower portion became home to the new visual and performing arts complex.

Most recently the health and wellness buildings opened on the north of Soquel Drive.

Next up is a green technology facility that just broke ground in Watsonville.

All this expansion and improvement came courtesy of community support in the form of voter-approved bonds, and it has allowed the college to serve more students more efficiently.

On the flip side, King says, the campus looks so good some community members have trouble understanding the reality of the budget crisis.

He and other college representatives still find themselves explaining the strict division between bond money, which is available only for the construction that voters supported, and the state funding that covers ongoing operations and keeps fees low. Simply put, money for buildings cannot be used to pay instructors' salaries.

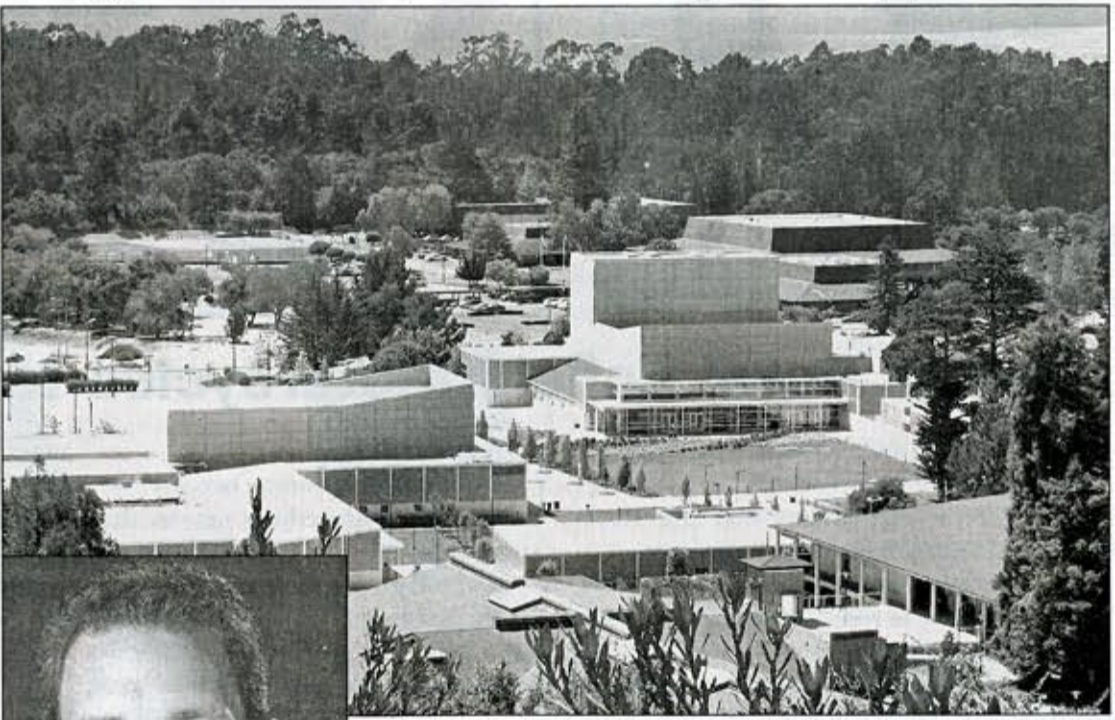
To bridge some of the gap left by years of state funding reductions, a stable of private donors has stepped in, easing some of the pain.

The Cabrillo College Foundation is the top earner in the state among community colleges, King said.

Along with six-figure donations from individuals, it has successfully competed for grants from the Hewlett and Gates Foundations aimed at getting and keeping at-risk students in the college.

What makes Cabrillo so popular? King's answer: Its people.

"I don't think there's any better faculty in the state of California," he said.



At Cabrillo College, new facilities supported by local bond measures contrast with the impacts of reduced state funding, according to President Brian King.

school graduates and now struggles to keep prices affordable at its public universities.

Cabrillo and other community colleges have long been an affordable option for students worried about the cost of a four-year school or those still uncertain what they wish to study.

Both of California's public university systems recently approved fee increases, which likely will only add to the number of students choosing Cabrillo for their first years of college.

However, they are finding it harder to get the classes they need in the once-standard two years, King said.

"It's possible but difficult," he said.

Part of the difficulty comes from class availability, and part from students' need to work.

California State University and University of California systems reduced the number of transfers they accept, King said.

"We have a great number of students who aren't able to transfer. The biggest worry is if they take a forced break they won't continue," he said.

A new law signed this September that takes effect in fall 2011 aims to help with transfer issues. It establishes a 60-unit transfer associate of arts degree. Community college students who earn that degree will be admitted to state university campuses as juniors.

King praised the law, which is projected to streamline transfers and provide space for more students by reducing enrollment in duplicate or unneeded classes.

Filling the New Buildings
Cabrillo's Aptos campus

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